

# Bandwagon

September-December 2013

Vol. 57 No. 5 & 6



The Journal of the Circus Historical Society



# President's Note

Starting with the next issue, the *Bandwagon* will become a quarterly publication. The Board of Trustees made this change so that the *Bandwagon* could be brought up to date by the end of 2014 and can continue as a logistically and fiscally sustainable print publication now and in the future. The change to a quarterly publication allows the editor more time to compile the journal, which assures issues filled with scholarly and engaging articles delving into the history of the circus arts both past and contemporary. For you, our member, it means that starting in 2015 you will receive a new *Bandwagon* regularly every three months. For fifty-four years, the *Bandwagon* has been the leading publication for the circus historical community and we promise to continue that legacy.

When we think of CHS we immediately think of the *Bandwagon*, but there are other benefits of membership. One of CHS's outreach vehicles is our website ([circushistory.org](http://circushistory.org)) that was launched in May 2002, by our past president, Judy Griffin. Presently, the site has 1,448 pages of wonderful circus source material of all types from historic circus routes to contemporary circus video links. On an average day, the site has 1,900 visits from individuals looking for circus history or information about circus workers and performers. The website's Circus History Message and Discussion Board receives questions from all over the world; special thanks go to the many CHS members such as Fred Dahlinger, Jr. who tackle the questions. Since the website has been up for twelve years, the board is reviewing how we can update the site to attract even more visitors and future members.

In 2010, Bob Cline, CHS Secretary-Treasurer, started a members-only newsletter, *News & Views*, which you receive six times a year. It is filled with happenings and events in the circus world and news of our members. This year, we will be adding more information about the status of CHS and strategic planning of the board. In 2009, Bob established the CHS's Facebook page that now has a following of over 2,300 with people joining daily and is "liked" by 975 people. He has also established the CHS presence on Twitter and Pinterest. CHS has gained new members because of the Facebook connection and the board is looking at how to make a stronger connection with our Facebook following.

The Circus Historical Society will hold its 2014 annual convention in Montreal, Canada and we will be visiting this capital of circus arts for the first time. Montreal is the

home of Cirque du Soleil, the National Circus School, and La TOHU – the City of Circus Arts – as well as the Montreal Circus Arts Festival: A Celebration of Circus Arts. Al Stencell, past president of CHS and show owner, is our convention chair and he is putting together an incredible program that will showcase this unique city where English and French cultures come together to create a circus world adventure like no other. This is a conference not to be missed! I look forward to seeing you in Montreal July 10-12, 2014.

Planning ahead, our 2015 convention will be held in conjunction with the Worldwide Circus Summit 2015 at the Eastern States Exposition fairgrounds in West Springfield, Massachusetts from July 15-18. The theme of the summit is Celebrating the Circus – Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow! and it promises to be a global circus extravaganza with circuses, seminars and workshops all happening at the wonderful location of the Big E! fairgrounds. Many CHS members are in leadership roles for the summit. Alan Campbell will be heading up the convention assisted by Don Covington, John Polacsek, and Lane Talburt.

This year the Circus Historical Society will celebrate 75 years as an organization. CHS has been known for its leadership in the preserving, promoting, and sharing the history of the circus arts. Since the 2012 convention in Baraboo, Wisconsin, the Board of Trustees has been working on how to strategically position CHS in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Meeting monthly by conference call, the board is grappling with many issues such as containing costs and increasing membership. The board is working on a two year budget that will be presented to the membership and, also, we are reviewing the governing code.

Change is never easy, but is inevitable. The board and I are dedicated to doing everything within our joint capabilities to ensure the continued viability and vitality of the Circus Historical Society as an organization. Looking forward, CHS will continue to work to assure that the circus arts, both past and present, are celebrated and recognized for their cultural importance. Thank you for your support of the Circus Historical Society and if you have any questions, please contact me ([presidentcirhissoc@gmail.com](mailto:presidentcirhissoc@gmail.com)).

Deborah W. Walk, President, 2014  
Circus Historical Society Board of Trustees



# Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society  
September-December 2013 Vol. 57, Numbers 5 & 6

## Editor

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## Membership Rate

Circus Historical Society membership is \$60.00 annually in the United States, \$80.00 annually in Canada, and \$105.00 annually for international members. Membership application and information are available on the CHS website at [www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org) or by contacting the Bandwagon office

## Website and Back Issues

An index of *Bandwagon* articles from earlier issues is available online at [www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org). Back issues are available from the Office of Publication.

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| President's Note . . . . .                | 2  |
| Editor's Note . . . . .                   | 4  |
| About the Covers . . . . .                | 5  |
| by Jennifer Lemmer Posey                  |    |
| Twain's "Stretcher" . . . . .             | 6  |
| <i>The Circus Shapes Huckleberry Finn</i> |    |
| by David Carlyon                          |    |
| Wayne McCary . . . . .                    | 28 |
| <i>After his first circus flopped,</i>    |    |
| <i>40 years of success followed</i>       |    |
| by Lane Talburt                           |    |
| Dexter Fellows . . . . .                  | 56 |
| <i>The Master of Ballyhoo</i>             |    |
| by Jerome Beatty                          |    |
| Gazing in the Big Cage . . . . .          | 64 |
| <i>Part I: Lions, Tigers and Trainers</i> |    |
| by Ken Kawata                             |    |
| The Death of Volante . . . . .            | 84 |
| by Steve Gossard                          |    |
| Makeup . . . . .                          | 90 |
| by Bill Ballantine                        |    |



"The man who can sit before this army of funny men and not smile would better see a plumber and have his face thawed out."

from the 1926  
Ringling Bros. and  
Barnum & Bailey  
Magazine and  
Daily Review

"100 Clowns"  
poster printed by  
Erie Lithograph in  
1928.

from the Tibbals  
Collection, The  
Ringling Museum



# Circus Historical Society

circushistory.org

## Mission Statement

*"To preserve, promote, and share  
through education the history and  
cultural significance of the circus and  
allied arts, past and present."*

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## Note from the Editor

Each of the pieces you will read here explores the stories of individuals and their own importance to the bigger story of the American circus. This double issue, filled with the wonderful scholarship of David Carlyon, an oral history by Lane Talburt, the diligent research of Ken Kawata, and the fascinating story of a circus tragedy shared by Steve Gossard, concludes the 2013 volume and allows us to jump into 2014.

On the subject of individual stories, a wise member of the CHS Emeritus Board suggested that members might appreciate knowing a bit about my background as it relates to my role in editing *Bandwagon*.

Although I now have worked with the circus collections at The Ringling Museum in Sarasota for over twelve years, compared to a lot of CHS members, I am still a relative "newbie" to the field of Circus History. I have been extremely fortunate to come in contact with many of you and have built my knowledge through hands-on work with historic collections and through the wonderful conversations and correspondences with circus historians, performers, and fans.

With a Bachelors degree from New College of Florida and a Masters in Art History with a focus on American Folk Art from Florida State University, I found myself with a unique opportunity to work with the Ringling Circus collection. My initiation, overseeing the digitization of the amazing lithos in Howard Tibbals' collections, had me hooked. For me, a love of the posters expanded to an interest in wardrobe and, ultimately, a fascination with the grand spectacles of the late 19th century. I have published articles in *Bandwagon* and *Planet Circus* and contributed essays to the catalog for *The Amazing American Circus Poster: The Strobbridge Lithographing Company* as well as *The American Circus*, a volume published in conjunction with Bard Graduate School's *The Circus in the City*.

I have worked at The Ringling through the construction of new buildings, the arrival of a railroad car, and numerous Circus Celebrity nights. When questions arise, I get to call men and women who were there and when new research is being undertaken, I often have the privilege of helping historians find material to further their scholarship. I also have the wonderful responsibility of boiling down the rich stories of the circus and its people to short labels that can inspire Museum visitors to go see a show! Most of all, I am like every CHS member, someone who has a passion for learning, understanding, and sharing circus history and I am grateful for the opportunity to do so.

For this particular issue, I owe thanks to Peter Shrake at Circus World Museum and Mark Schmitt at Illinois State University's Milner Library for their quick assistance in locating images for this issue. As always, John and Mardi Wells have shown great good humor in creating another visually captivating issue. Toby Ballantine, while working through his father's archives, very kindly shared a short article that brings to life one of the crucial elements of clowning—the makeup. Likewise, Larry Kellogg, a former PR man for Ringling, called my attention to the article about the infamous Dexter Fellows, the "harbinger of spring." David Carlyon, Steve Gossard, Ken Kawata, and Lane Talburt have all shared articles of depth, each with his own unique flair for sharing the stories of the circus.

JLP



## About the Covers

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

The front cover image includes the likenesses of more than a thousand members of the circus industry of the early twentieth century. The faces of so many become a perfect symbol of the unified variety and skilled celebrities that have always characterized the circus. Each person represented played some role in that era of the large tented shows. This "mammoth picture of circus celebrities" was created by Charles Address whose career spanned over forty-five years actively working in the show world, either in front of the audience performing magic or behind the scenes, serving in various management capacities for the largest of the American shows.<sup>1</sup>

According to an article by C. G. Sturtevant, published in a 1930 issue of *The White Tops*, Charles Address was born in 1852 in Brockville, Canada, and was recognized in his childhood for exceptional skills as a ventriloquist.<sup>2</sup> At the age of ten he apprenticed to a traveling magician and in short order was performing magic and training birds for his act. From an early age he also began learning the business side of traveling shows. After working for others for several years, Charles and his brother, Wilson, struck out on their own with Address Bros. Grand Entertainment.

Address took his show west to California and found great success presenting his unique blend of magic, trained animals, music, comedy, and some circus acts. He also originated the gift game, selling tickets of which a small percentage were winners of various prizes. Judging by posters printed for Address in 1917, he continued to use the gift game as an added income throughout his performing career. Among the many innovations that were credited to Address were the first company use of a Pullman train car and the invention of an early form of the stake driver.<sup>3</sup> He was also one of the first to use the term "carnival" in a show title. He grew his show throughout the 1880s, during which time the poster featured on the back cover was printed by Strobridge Lithographing Company. A bad business partnership with Ad Sells in 1890 cost Address most of his show.

With his extraordinary skills in the business of the traveling circus, Charles Address landed a position of "Legal Adjustor" with the Ringling Bros. in 1891 and by 1903 he held the same position on the Barnum & Bailey show, where he would continue on in various management roles until his (first) retirement at the end of 1907. During the period, Address compiled route books for the Greatest Show on Earth.

Even in retirement, Address kept busy, contributing columns to the *New York Clipper*, *Show World*, and *Billboard*. He was also active in the Showmen's League, serving as secretary. By 1917, as evidenced by posters, he was once again performing his novel magic and trained bird acts. Address died in 1933.

As Charles Address was likely contemplating his exit from the management of the Barnum & Bailey management in 1907, he undertook the task of creating the "largest photograph ever made."<sup>4</sup> Soliciting portraits from the men and women of the circus, Address found himself overwhelmed with contributions and with orders for prints of this special image. Various accounts record the faces of 1,200 or 2,000 individuals from all fields of the circus industry captured together in one frame, echoing the diversity and unity of the traveling shows of the period. While Address clearly selected certain portraits including the Ringlings, Barnum, Bailey and Adam Forepaugh, most of the people in the image elected to share their likeness to be part of this grand display.

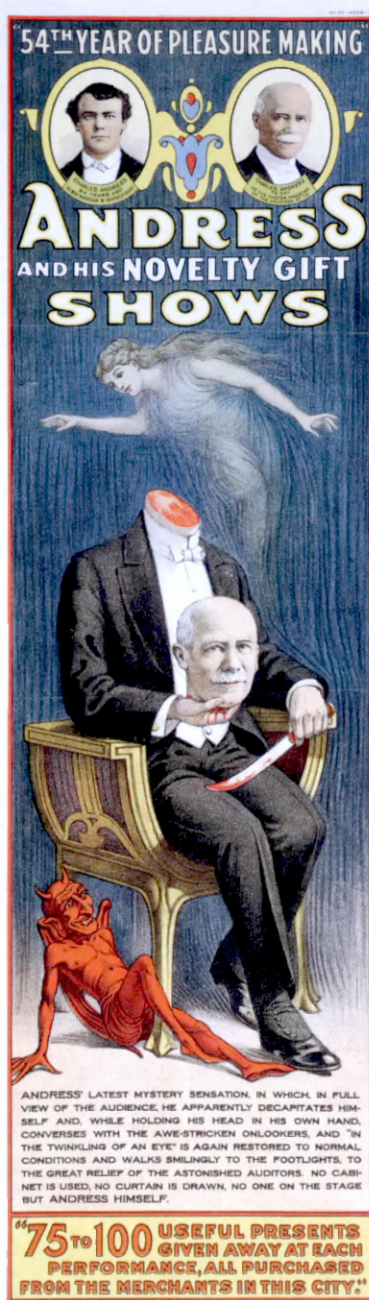
Apart from the commercial value, it is impossible to know Address' exact motivation in creating the image. It may well have been a means for him to capture in one overwhelming image the wealth of talents and unique personalities that shaped the circus world that he so clearly cared about. By the time the prints were ready in early November of 1907, he was stressed to keep up with all the orders that had flooded into his Chicago office. This copy of the photograph as well as the poster on the back cover are part of the Tibbals Collection at the Ringling Museum.

1. *New York Clipper*, November 9, 1907.

2. C. G. Sturtevant, "Meet Uncle Charlie Address," *The White Tops*, January 1930.

3. *ibid.*

4. *New York Clipper*, September 28, 1907.







LITH. OF G. & W. ENDICOTT, 35. BEEKMAN ST. N. YORK.

AS HE APPEARED IN **HOWES' & CO'S CIRCUS**, PALMO'S OPERA HOUSE.

NEW YORK, FEB. 23<sup>d</sup> 1846.

"Dan Rice—The Celebrated Shaksperian Clown."

Lithograph, 1846-1849. Harvard Theater Collection





Mark Twain

# CIRCUS



Dan Rice

## TWAIN'S "STRETCHER"

### The Circus Shapes *Huckleberry Finn*

by David Carlyon

The circus in Chapter 22 of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is what Huck would have called a "stretcher." While this episode is pleasing for readers, plausible to scholars, and useful for its author, a closer look at the nineteenth-century context shows it to be historically inaccurate and thematically incongruous. Historically, the circus Samuel Clemens knew had been tawdry, coarse, and violent, as well as sophisticated, yet he hid both roughness and refinement to conjure a sentimentalized depiction of the "splendidest sight that ever was." Thematically, his fairy-tale image of the circus ashore disrupts the book's dichotomy between glowing nature on the river and degraded human enterprises ashore. It also temporarily turns sharp-eyed Huck into a wide-eyed innocent. This

may be a "mostly true book," as Huck says in Chapter 1, but its circus is one of the author's most substantial stretchers.

A close look at these anomalies offers a new perspective on this great American novel. It reveals the influence of the antebellum circus, in its historical complexity and its leading star, Dan Rice—clown, showman, and the "American Humorist" before Twain. While some have noticed that Twain used Rice's show as a model, the extent of that influence remains unexplored. Like Picasso painting different perspectives of one face, Twain isolated various elements of the raw antebellum original and scattered them within the circus episode and in adjacent ones. The sex and violence of circus peeks





Between Dan Rice's early visits to Hannibal, he sat for a picture in St. Louis, with a roguish grin, unusual for poses in the era.

Daguerreotype,  
Thomas M. Easterly, Missouri Historical Society.

through the Sherburn section, immediately preceding Huck's circus; sawdust sophistication, especially Dan Rice's clever use of Shakespeare, glimmers in the bastardized "Hamlet's Soliloquy" of the fake Duke and King; their Royal Nonesuch directly echoes a Rice humbug; and other "Riceana" peppers the book. Though the allusions are obscure now, Twain's contemporaries would have recognized them. These elements individually deepen our understanding of Twain's craft. Together they suggest a structure in a book often deemed to have none, as the anomalous circus exactly in the middle of the book pivots the action from the picaresque episodes of the first half to the second half's fierce satire. They also resonate thematically. Considering Twain's unsettling visit to Hannibal in 1882, his return to the unfinished manuscript at the Sherburn episode immediately before the circus, and his brief use of a sentimentality he otherwise scorned, these clustered bits of circus begin to look like an emotional pivot from the book's early nostalgia for a boyhood Eden to savage

satire of the degraded culture he faced as an adult.

Though it may seem naïve (or presumptuous) to suggest influence on *Huckleberry Finn* that no one has noticed before, it makes sense historically. The original adult readers in 1885 would have recalled the rowdy antebellum circus but not cared about its absence from Twain's book because his substitute, this nostalgic ode to sawdust and spangles, suited emerging tastes. Subsequent readers, accustomed to mushrooming sentimentality about circus, could barely perceive the institution any other way. Meanwhile scholars, similarly inured, note that Twain modeled his fictional circus on Dan Rice's, point out parallels in the book, and pass on to presumably more significant matters, reinforcing the notion that Huck's circus is historically accurate. That claim has certainly been made for the book generally. *Huckleberry Finn* looks "like the very truth, like an historical document;" it is "a historical novel;" its excellence lies "in its power of telling the truth;" it stands between "documentary and dream."<sup>1</sup> Circus historiography has not helped. Over two centuries, writing about American circus has relied on public-relations puffery and unquestioning enthusiasm, with sentimentality the default mode, making mistakes inevitable. Dixon Wecter referred to "P. T. Barnum's circus" in 1853 *Hannibal*, though it was no circus but a traveling menagerie and museum, while Barnum had little to do with circus until he was lured from retirement decades later; Wecter and Walter Blair both conflated two notices from different papers in different years, an 24 August 1852 *Hannibal Tri-Weekly Messenger* review of Dan Rice and a one-sentence mention in Twain's column in the 26 May 1853 *Hannibal Journal*; Leo Marx confused the clown in

Huck's circus with the fake-drunk rider; and editors Victor Fischer and Lin Salamo passed on the impression that Rice was the model for the novel's riding act, though he did not perform on horseback.<sup>2</sup> Between scholarly neglect and popular sentimentality, circus comes down through history as innocuously marginal.

### The Circus Anomalous

That picture would have astonished antebellum observers. Circus played a major role in mid-nineteenth-century America. A rowdy, adult amusement, it drew thousands in large city theaters and in tents large and small. While the circus business had become child-centered by the time Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, the circuses he knew as he grew to manhood featured sex, violence, and topical allusions that included politics.

The sentimental image of small-time performance did apply in the early years. Philip Astley gets credit for the first





From Dan Rice's Sketches (1849), one of the best antebellum circus publicity documents, this image shows the variety of acts from the fundamental horse-human partnership of early circus.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals

circus in 1768, as he combined tricks on horse, variety skills, and comedy in London. He did not use the word "circus" however, instead advertising his arena, which he called "Amphitheatre." It was a competitor who first used the word, naming his circular arena the "Royal Circus," a classical allusion to the round Roman circus. In 1793 Philadelphia, John Bill Ricketts opened the first American circus—again the word referred only to the venue—attended by horse-lover George Washington.<sup>3</sup> Still, efforts in the United States remained sporadic until the form expanded in the 1820s, when it finally acquired a name and a traveling home. James W. Bancker, apparently the first American-born proprietor, applied the label of his arena, "New York Circus," to his touring outfit in 1824. The usage caught on. Within a year, nearly every such traveling show called itself a "circus."<sup>4</sup> Technology drove another change. Early circuses either had to show in the open air, present under the sky within enclosures of canvas or wood (Astley's "amphitheater"), or throw up its own building. In 1825 J. Purdy Brown took advantage of the invention of a lighter weave canvas to create a touring pavilion—the name for tents until the 1850s. Now shows could travel daily, if necessary, whenever they needed a fresh audience.<sup>5</sup>

That launched a boom. The modest, nameless, geographically limited enterprise became an audacious trailblazer. Spreading its canvas literally and figuratively to reach an expanding population, circus was one of the rare institutions that linked the sprawling country before the advent of trains or telegraph. Traditional accounts record the late 1800s as a golden age of circus, and indeed it was, but the development of circus into the 1840s and 1850s nearly matched it. Tents grew to be some of the largest structures on the



North American continent, bigger than anything except a few buildings in major cities. The same issue of *Tri-Weekly* that reviewed Rice's circus carried an advertisement boasting that his tent could seat 10,000 people.<sup>6</sup> Even allowing for show-business exaggeration, the claim displays the physical scope of the enterprise. The number and size of troupes also grew, as did the presentations. Circuses offered more riders, greater skills, and lavish spectacle. Even as touring exploded, circus retained its position as an urban institution. In late autumn, most circus workers and performers, like other seasonal hands, headed for winter jobs, while luminaries like Rice presented all-star shows in the larger city theaters. The same theater that presented Shakespeare one week might offer a circus the next. Immersed in this horse-based culture, people attended circuses to assess four- and two-legged performers, just as fans now analyze baseball teams or Broadway divas. Again, importantly, antebellum circus was primarily adult fare. Children did attend but circus remained a mature pleasure through the Civil War, offering violence, sexuality, sophisticated commentary, and exhilarating humbug.

Rice represents a key element of antebellum circus: the talking clown. This alternative to the knockabout clown was vigorously oral. Talking clowns told jokes; cracked wise with the ringmaster; sang current songs or their own lyrics to popular tunes; gave orations, comic or sentimental; and let fly local allusions that often extended into politics. With their old jokes and new songs, plus the latest news, the nineteenth-century talking clown spread his reach across the country like radio and television in the twentieth-century, or the Internet in the early twenty-first century. A talking clown could also be a "Shakespearean Clown," tossing off quotations or inserting burlesques of the Bard into the mix. Another variation, cousin to the whiteface clown, was the blackface circus clown. To the thwang of the banjo and the clatter of tambo and bones—tambourine and bone castanets—white men smeared burnt cork on their faces to sing, waggled their legs in imitation of blacks dancing, and told jokes in "negro" dialect. Rice himself slid between the shiny greasepaint of whiteface and the flat black of burnt cork, with its pungent smell of overcooked popcorn. That can be seen in a 17 June 1843 letter to Morrison Foster, his pal (and Stephen Foster's brother): "I am clowning an also my nigero singing and dancing is drawing good houses."<sup>7</sup> In the same year as Rice's letter, four circus performers combined their blackface skills to serenade a circus owner and, inspired by a crowd's enthusiastic response, formed the "Virginia Minstrels," sparking the minstrelsy craze that lasted through the century. Though most scholarly work has focused on blackface minstrelsy on its own, it emerged significantly out of circus. A series of articles in the *New York Clipper* through the 1870s relates that development. Though Rice continued using whiteface makeup, and occasionally blackface, he in-

creasingly appeared in the ring without makeup or clown costume, as a gentlemanly observer in a tailcoat. Decades before the phrase was used to advertise Twain's lecturing, Dan Rice rose to fame as the "American Humorist."

The suggestion that circus was harmlessly marginal would have also astonished thirteen-year old Sam Clemens when Rice's Metropolitan & Hippodramatic Circus hauled up in Hannibal in 1848. Scholars assume that Sam attended Dan's show that June 26. Though no ticket stubs or diary entries place Clemens in Rice's tent, circuses were alluring exceptions to the drab rural routine. It is inconceivable that the lively boy would have skipped the rare excitement. Twain biographer waxed eloquent on the appeal when circus "seemed a passport to paradise. All the river towns had their barns plastered with the bills of yesterday's and tomorrow's troupe. The taprooms of every tavern were covered with the garish chromos, often running up the walls and continued above."<sup>8</sup> Again, small town did not necessarily mean small circus. The economics of touring meant that Hannibal would see the same performance folks had seen in big-city St. Louis. Beyond the usual circus thrill, Sam Clemens would have been particularly drawn to the outspoken, pugnacious Rice, with his lightning wit and thundering voice.

Although Rice had been in "the show business" for only a few years, at twenty-five he already had his own outfit and a large reputation, propelled by his quick wit. Fame increased as he appealed to the growing middle class with pronouncements that he "aspired to something higher"; it increased further as he expanded his "hits on the times" into pointed political commentary, and then legitimate campaigns from the ring, for the Pennsylvania state legislature in 1864, Congress in 1866, and a brief but genuine run for president in 1867. (Comparisons to the quips of Will Rogers capture Rice's national renown but miss his sharp edge; the twenty-first century offers a more apt similarity in television's satirical *Daily Show*.) As a circus owner, he presented nationally renowned acts, especially animals—a stair-climbing horse, a tightrope-walking elephant—and he also offered huge spectacles. On 13 February 1858 at Philadelphia's National Theatre, Rice augmented his horses and acrobats with "The Magic Ring," an extended display that included running water, fire, "A Full Corps de Ballet and 100 Auxiliaries."<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile his slogans resonated through the culture. Rice presented himself as no clown but the gentlemanly "American Humorist," a title Twain later adopted. When Rice boasted of rising from bankruptcy with only a horse and his wit in his "One-Horse Show," he capitalized on old slang for small insignificance to add a new layer of triumphant meaning, irony increasing its currency in a country that roots for the underdog. Dominant in the 1850s, he billed his enterprise as "Dan Rice's Great Show"; in the 1870s his former press agent inflated that into "The Greatest Show On Earth" for Barnum and Bailey. Through it all, a key



part of Rice's appeal was his pugnacity. His many fights, feuds, and retorts to critics revealed the anger in his soul; they also reflected a canny business awareness that controversy attracted a crowd, and that people especially swarmed to hear his side of things. When he quarreled publicly with the *New York Tribune* and its contentious editor Horace Greeley, the *New York Clipper* of 19 February 1859 considered it an equal contest: "The *Tribune* has a large circulation [but] Dan Rice, with a large audience, has been known to wield a tremendous influence . . . The pair are well matched." <sup>10</sup> The *New York Times*, on its 18 July 1860 front page, teased that Greeley had given up the battle. Though Rice was little remembered on his death in 1900, he had probably been seen by more Americans than any other antebellum figure. Dan Rice was a nineteenth-century byword for circus, for clowns, and for comedy generally.

Not all were amused. On 29 June 1848, three days after Rice's circus steamed out of town, the *Hannibal Journal* fired off one of the most extreme—and entertaining—attacks he faced in a half-century of public life. Circuses often kindled criticism, and his growing popularity made him a prime target. This editor scorned the showman's troupe as a "motley gang of bacchanalian mountebanks," and his show as "one of the most contemptibly obscene things . . . that has ever disgraced our city."

As to Dan Rice, the "great Shakspearian clown," we think the title Shakspearian blackguard would suit him much better. He is as perfectly devoid of true wit as he is of the principles of common decency, and every attempt he makes at anything of the kind is a mere slang drawling of the most repulsive obscenity. It is perfectly sickening to hear the most beautiful language and sublime ideas of the immortal "Bard of Avon" prostituted and mingled up with

# NATIONAL THEATRE!

Under the exclusive management of

# DAN RICE!

## SECOND NIGHT,

### AND GRAND GALA PERFORMANCE.

Tuesday Eve'ng, November 12th,

## THE GREAT 1861

# American Humorist!

And "Admirable Chrichton of the Modern Pantheon, respectfully announces to the public, that he has fitted up the above establishment for the purpose of presenting, for a brief season, a series of

## RECHERCHE AND CLASSIC PERFORMANCES.

Combining with the ancient sports of the Grecian and Roman Amphitheatres, the legendary and chivalrous errantry of the Middle Age, and the brilliant CHEF D'OEUVRES of the modern Arena; the whole garnished and spiced by the quaint, original and terse philosophy and scintillating wit of the

## Great Jester of the Age!

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### THE PROGRAMME

Will commence with the grand romanticpageant, entitled

## DAN RICE'S

# DREAM OF CHIVALRY

A practical and allegorical vision of the age of "faire ladies and heroic knights," the days of the

# TILT AND THE TOURNAY

commencing with a grand and brilliant procession to the field where brave deeds are rewarded by admiring glances from the bright eyes of beauty. The joust and combat for the award, by the Queen of Love, and a daguerreotype sketch of the graphic picture of "Ivan-hoe," concluding with the dreamer's characteristic humorous conception of the struggle of the would be Heroic Knights.

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SECOND ACT.

## Great Timambulist Feat

### OR THE LEAP FOR LIFE,

By Mr. Rice's Pupil, WM. YOUNG.

This top half of a handbill from a winter engagement shows Rice still presenting his "Dream of Chivalry," complete with "Tilt and the Tournay," years after he brought it to Hannibal. It also features the label he rode to fame, the "American Humorist." Handbill, National Theatre (Philadelphia), 12 Nov. 1861.

Author's Collection



the most common place dram-shop slang by the sacriligious [sic] tongue of this brazen faced traducer who, leper like, turns every thing he touches to moral filth and uncleanness.<sup>11</sup>

Amusing in its excess, this screed might be dismissed as a rustic rant except for the window it opens into a larger issue, what might be called the antebellum culture wars.

When Rice proclaimed he "aspired to something higher," he spoke to a developing middle class, itself aiming at "something higher" but anxious about asserting status in an officially classless society. Claims of "refinement" and "de-

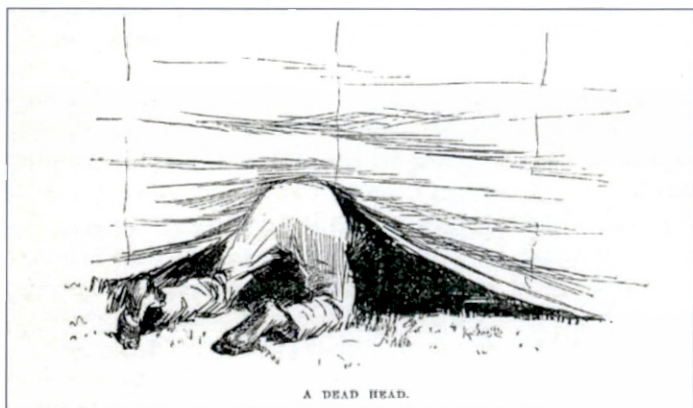
corum" soothed that anxiety, providing ostensibly neutral criteria for seeing oneself as high. Praise for Rice often included praise of his aspirational claims, which, in circular fashion, supported the aspirations of those who praised, for that implicitly meant they were refined enough to appreciate his refinement. Karen Halttunen, in *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, has pointed out the crucial circularity of aspirational claims. But high requires low, and the struggle in this nineteenth-century aspirational project centered on dividing one from the other. That meant claims of refinement typically came not alone but accompanied by attacks on the presumptively unrefined. (Scholars analyzing the era's aesthetic comments might do well to employ a historiographic version of the legal system's Hearsay Rule, treating aspirational praise as questionable for the truth of a matter but valuable for understanding cultural state of mind.) This Hannibal scribe's bile shows that process in action. Not content to criticize, he staked his own claim to refinement by denying Rice's utterly, and by condemning the majority who enjoyed the showman. Flailing at the "noise made by some of the presses of our neighboring cities," the editor revealed how much his supposedly aesthetic attack was really aimed at the society around him: "And yet, strange to tell, this misnomer of a circus, pandering as it does to some of the vilest passions of the human heart, is tolerated, nay, even largely encouraged by people who under other circumstances arrogate to themselves the title of a moral and even religious community."<sup>12</sup>

That favoring "noise" rose in Hannibal again a few years later, on 24 August 1852. This season, the star featured a new spectacle, "Rice's Dream of Chivalry." He had introduced it during his five-month run in one of the country's major cities, New Orleans. Accounts toward the end of that long stand, in the *Delta*, *Picayune*, and *Crescent* of March 21-25, described him pretending to wake in the ring to "the days of chivalry and knight-errantry"—a conceit Twain would use for *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Cheering this "unrivaled comic gester [sic]," the *Hannibal Tri-Weekly Messenger* took a jab at its rival newspaper. Directly contradicting the complaint in the *Journal*, the *Messenger* pronounced that "a more modest clown never convulsed his audiences with laughter." By then the *Journal* had a new editor, Sam Clemens' older brother, Orion.<sup>13</sup> The following year, on 26 May 1853, in his last column for his brother (the one scholars mistakenly conflated with the 1852 review), Sam made his interest in Dan manifest, remarking on the unremarkable fact that Rice's circus had landed in Louisville, Kentucky.

Of course, capturing the excitement of circus in *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain had no obligation to include its raw, rambunctious side. His responsibility was to his work, not to historical exactitude. Nevertheless, to appreciate the influence of circus on his masterwork, it is important to rec-



Illustrations in sequence from *Huckleberry Finn* display the juxtaposition of violence and circus, as Sherburn shoots Boggs on one page and Huck sneaks under the circus tent on the next.



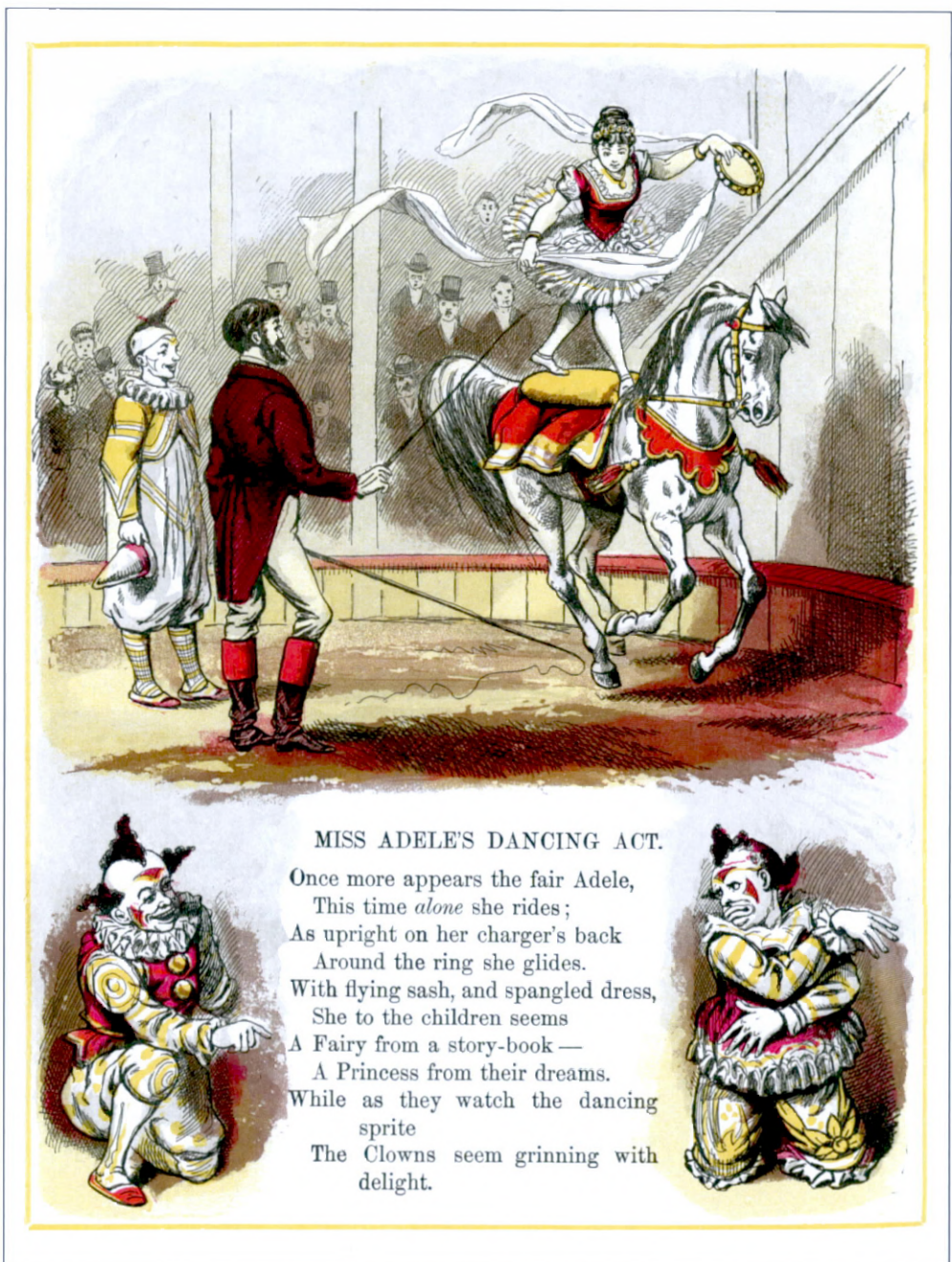


ognize how Twain wove those elements in.

### Sherburn and Circus, Sex and Violence

The antebellum circus that young Clemens relished, and which the mature Twain hid, churned with sex and violence, those ancient emblems of human concern about life and death. The violence came in one form in the constant risk of accidents. Wagons rattled over bad roads in pitch-dark nights; storms raged at tents; horses galloped within arm's reach of people massed around the ring; acrobats flung themselves without nets; workers hoisted, toted, and tugged, usually sluggish from little sleep. Just as routinely, the touring circus faced fights with locals. Performers were outsiders, always suspect (sometimes with cause) as pickpockets, thieves, corrupters of morals, and a drain on the local economy. Whatever the excuse, each town's rowdies came looking for trouble, and fights erupted daily. The savvy veteran William C. Coup, the man who lured Barnum from retirement in 1870, was blunt: A traveling circus had to be an "efficient fighting unit."<sup>14</sup> So rare was peace that a journal of Dan Rice's 1856 season notes the days when they had *no fights*. Beyond simple fisticuffs, disputes often exploded into pitched battles of clubs and guns. Sometimes people were killed.

Like anyone of his era, Twain knew circus violence, and he captured a flavor of it in the circus episode. When an apparent drunk clambers on a horse, it angers the crowd, which rises and threatens to attack him. The crowd settles down however once the drunk sheds layers of clothing to reveal himself as a performer, admirably skilled. The routine, already old when it first fooled young Clemens, was called the Flying Wardrobe, or by the 1850s, a "Pete Jenkins" act.<sup>15</sup> This near violence though only hinted at the extreme violence of the traveling show. Twain came closer to the mark in the incident preceding Huck's circus. In Chapter 21 drunken Boggs

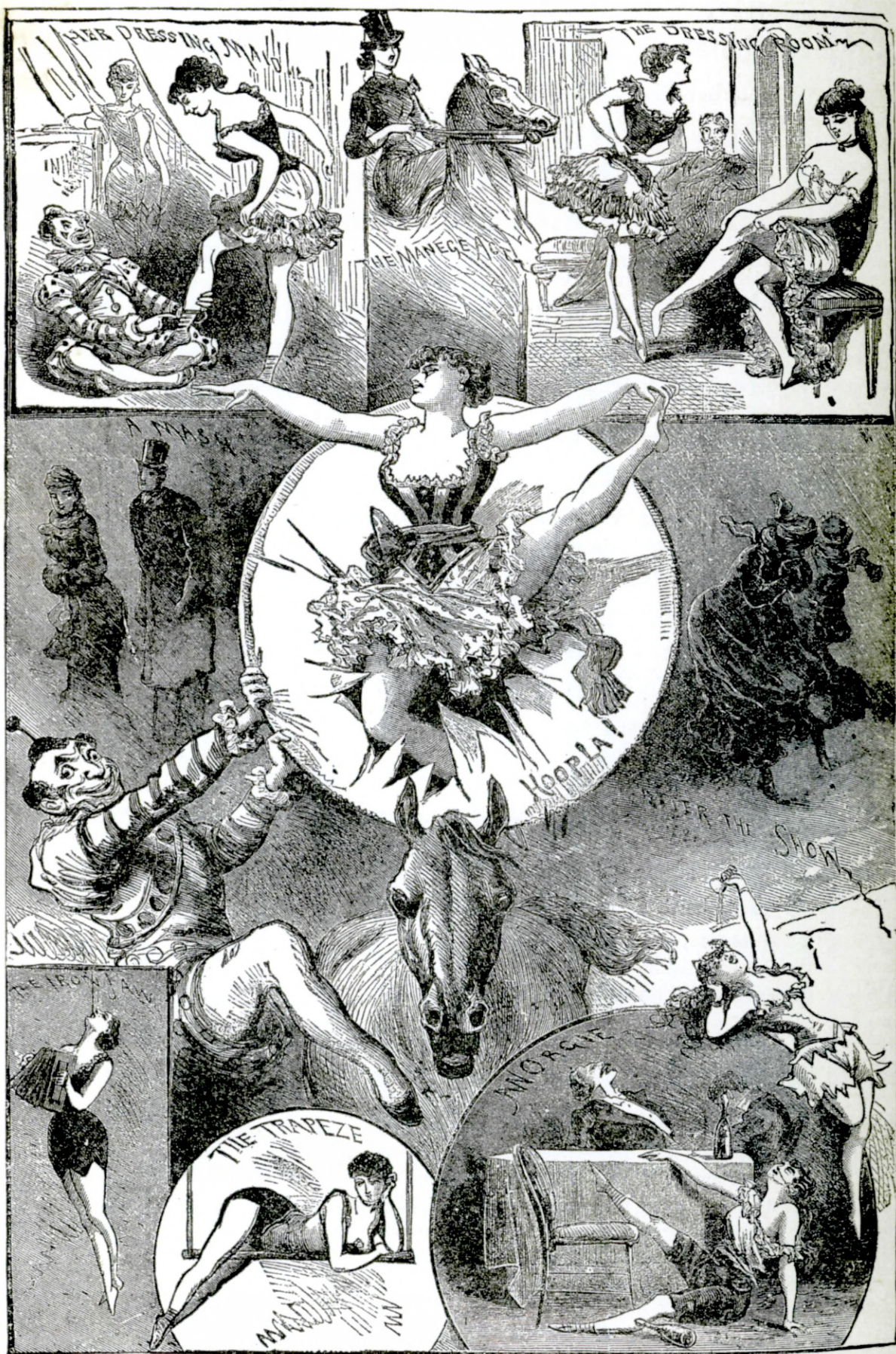


*"The Clowns seem grinning with delight." This 1883 picture from a children's book matched Twain's description of an equestrienne, both of them variations on a common circus image, with men looking up her skirt.*

*A Visit to the Circus.* New York, 1883. Author's Collection.

rides into town and harangues Colonel Sherburn, who warns the drunk he has till one o'clock to leave town; when Boggs isn't gone, Sherburn shoots him dead, and an angry mob forms to lynch the killer. Scholars have pointed out parallels with the ensuing circus: Drunken Boggs on horseback and the apparently drunk rider in the ring; the town mob seeking revenge and the circus crowd rising in anger; and the two controlling figures, Sherburn and the ringmaster. The lesson has long seemed to be that Huck's circus represents a light-hearted version of the deadly seriousness preceding







*An illustration from John Jennings' sensationalist look at Theatrical and Circus Life (512) in 1882 suggests the sexuality latent in circus.*

it, Twain setting parallel instances against each other. What has been missed however is how nearly this scene of greater violence echoes what happened almost daily at the actual circus. The book's agitated circus crowd reflects a relatively mild version of that original violence; the immediately preceding mob comes closer to the brutal, bloody reality.

Sex also reared its head at the circus. First, there were the clowns' bawdy jests. Newspapers would not print those they found objectionable but a few left a hint in complaints about clowns relying on *Joe Miller's Joke Book*. Partly they saw the objects of their scorn as unoriginal. The book, first published in 1739, was so popular in the nineteenth century that it grew tenfold, reaching over 1,500 jokes in a 1903 edition. Worse for defenders of community morals were its earthy jests, like the one about a wench who spent time around the law courts, that "if she had as much law in her head, as she had in her tail, she would be one of the ablest counsels" in town.<sup>16</sup> Rice had his own tales to enliven performances. He based one story of sex on an 1846 incident in his life. On the accusation of an outraged husband, a sheriff in western New York went to arrest Rice on a charge of "criminal conversation," that is, adultery. Rice gave leg bail—he escaped—and stayed on the lam until the sheriff smoked him out a few days later on a steamer in Lake Erie. The *Buffalo Morning Express* carried reports of the sensational affair from August 28 till his September 2 release, reason not given. As Rice told the tale, he embellished those bare facts, while dropping heavy hints that it all was true.<sup>17</sup> Beyond clowns' words was the sexuality in bodily display. Performers dressed in so few clothes that they looked nearly naked. Twain, in one of his nearest literary approaches to sexuality, emphasized that link as he wrote in Chapter 16 of *Tom Sawyer* about a pretend circus: "their naked skin represented flesh-colored 'tights' very fairly; so they drew a ring in the sand and had a circus . . ." In "The Circus," Walt Whitman enthused over the human forms he saw at Rice's show in 1856 Brooklyn, and other observers positively quivered with excitement describing their favorite performers. One diarist committed his heavy breathing to the page: "Her arms were all bare; her leg, cased in fleshings, were as good as bare up to the hip. . . . [Men] held her upside down in the air, her limbs all sprawling apart. . . . her fair young face all crimson with heat and wet with perspiration, [she] perched up there, naked and unprotected . . ." <sup>18</sup> It was more than visual pleasure. Prostitution also got people worked up. Outraged cries about circus performers' easy virtue corresponded in part to availability of sex.

While sex does not correspond to a specific event in *Huckleberry Finn*, it teases around the edges. When Sher-

burn harangues the mob, he sneers that they barely have the courage to tar and feather "poor friendless cast-out women that come along here," a hint at prostitutes that Twain had made stronger in an earlier draft.<sup>19</sup> This is directly adjacent, cheek-to-cheek, so to speak, to Huck's visit to the circus. A more direct hint of sex lurks in Twain's description of equestriennes standing on horseback. At first blush, it is an innocent, almost syrupy account, with "every lady's rose-leafy dress flapping soft and silky around her hips, and she looking like the most loveliest parasol." However the same words might prompt a more genuine blush if read in awareness of the routine circus pitch of sexuality. The scantily clad women and men of the circus were on display to a similar degree and with the same intent to draw customers of the most titillating of modern advertising. So it would not require a prurient reader to ponder things soft and silky around hips. Nor is it difficult to recognize the voyeurism inherent in an image of a skirt raised "like the most loveliest parasol," like an umbrella. Indeed, a recurring visual depiction of circus through the nineteenth century showed just that picture. On bills (posters), in circus advertising, on trade cards, and in children's books, an equestrienne stands on a running horse while men look up at her—or under her skirt—raised in just the manner Twain describes. Reading the circus episode as a sweet interlude conjures little trace of sexuality, but looking at it in context, as adult fare rife with mature interests, raises it to full display.<sup>20</sup>

### "Shakspere" and Circus Sophistication

After Huck leaves the circus, he goes straight to the "Shaksperean Revival" of the Duke and King. Chapter 21 records their featured act, "Hamlet's Soliloquy," a hodgepodge cobbled from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*.

To be or not to be; that is the bare bodkin  
That makes calamity of so long life;  
For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do  
come to Dunsinane,

...

... But soft you, the fair Ophelia:  
Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws,  
But get thee to a nunnery—go!

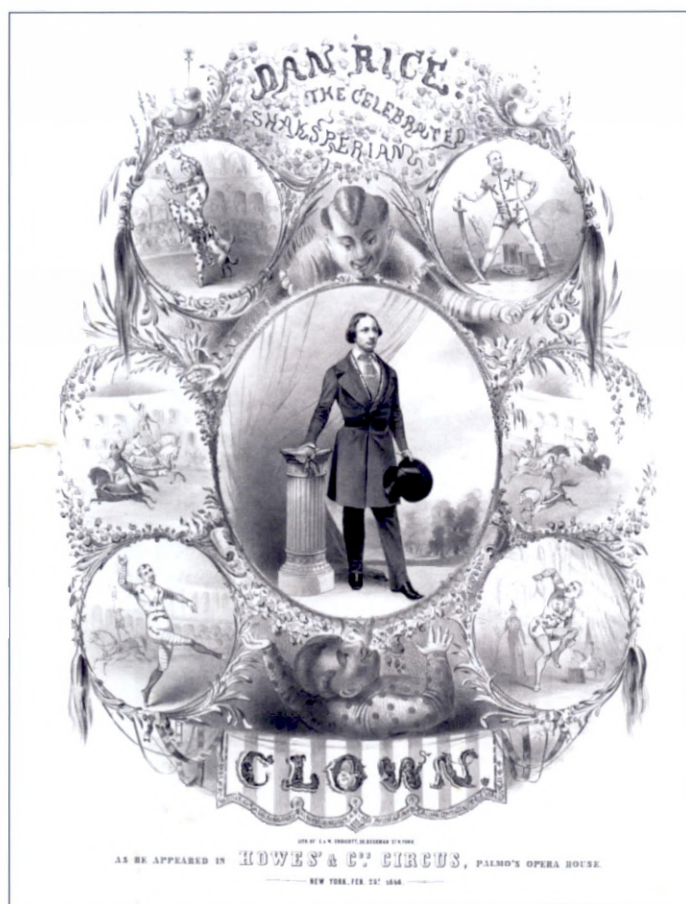
In twenty-five lines of folderol, Twain deftly satirized two quack performers.

This parody has been read as Twain's indictment of bad performances he had endured. That, along with the *Hannibal Journal's* opinion of Rice, in turn comports with presumptions about the era's performance generally, of third-rate performers and dimwitted audiences. One scholar is typical in declaring that the Bard's plays "had not reached the common man of the Mississippi Valley," and that "apparently no one in Arkansas knows that no such speech exists in Shakespeare."<sup>21</sup> That is typical of many later cultural observ-



ers. This conventional wisdom blossoms in the Rube Story, my collective label for different versions of the tale, often applied to Shakespearean performance, about a slack-jawed rube too ignorant to realize he is watching a play. Such tales abound in scholarship and popular literature; rare is the history examining nineteenth-century performance that does not include an example. However, following the trail of these stories to their sources reveals them to be cultural fantasies, either an exaggeration of the original instance or, more often, simply fiction. In either case, the Rube Story served as a cultural divider. Tellers of the Rube Story contrasted their implicitly sophisticated superiority against a benighted person who laughably misunderstood performance conventions, always someone drawn from those we would now call the marginalized—rustics, of course, as well as slaves, “red injuns,” women, Mormons. Now the Rube Story’s fictions-passed-on-as-fact continue to perpetuate the conventional wisdom of a benighted nineteenth-century culture, presumably unable to rise to the sublime heights of Shakespeare.<sup>22</sup>

Twain painted a more nuanced picture. While his depiction of the two rogues did display his low regard for Mississippi Valley culture generally, and he may have been indulging an old-fashioned Missouri rivalry by writing about ignorant Arkansas, the Shakespeare episode did not necessarily ridicule the rustics. Twain shows the performers to be mediocre, in their bastardized “Hamlet” and in their shabby skill, not to mention their base character. About this particular audience for Shakespeare however, he notes only that it was a small crowd and that they laughed. While conventional wisdom about backwoods audiences will assume this picture shows that not many were interested in high culture, and even that few couldn’t appreciate the Bard, Twain did not write that. The circumstances he presented in those four lines can just as reasonably be interpreted to show audience savoir-faire: Prospective customers stayed away because they recognized, as we do in reading, that the rogues presented paltry stuff, and the few in attendance laughed because it was laughably bad. After all, eager, knowledgeable audiences made Shakespeare antebellum America’s favorite playwright. That extended to a widespread fondness for Shakespearean parodies, founded on the culture’s knowing appreciation of the plays. Twain had a sure grasp on the culture around him so it is not surprising that he included a pastiche in *Huckleberry Finn*, or that he tried his hand at an extended parody.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to later gibes at crude rustics barely comprehending what they saw, these savvy audiences joined in partnership over the footlights to meet, match and prod performance quality through countless productions across the century. If Shakespeare is better understood on stage than on the page, then antebellum audiences, whose primary experience of the plays was repeated attendance, might have appreciated the Bard better than later audiences. Indeed an urban bootblack in 1856 had more opportuni-



*"Dan Rice—The Celebrated Shaksperian Clown."*

Lithograph, 1846-1849. Harvard Theater Collection.

ties to see Shakespeare than an English professor 150 years later. Ironically, to look down on the rogues' audience is to echo the rogues' condescension. Perhaps "these Arkansaw lunkheads couldn't come up to Shakespeare" but that was the Duke's sneer, not Twain's. He knew what a scholar later discussed, that Hannibal and other western towns were no primitive frontier, but had debating societies, schools, and newspapers.<sup>24</sup> That enthusiasm for Shakespeare extended to circuses.<sup>25</sup> A particular favorite was *Richard III* because circus remained a horse-based amusement. So an act might be introduced with the line "My horse, my horse, my kingdom for a horse," and a popular routine was that play's Act V presented on horseback. (Twain depicted the fake Duke and King practicing the climactic sword fight from *Richard III*.)

Parodies were also popular in the circus.<sup>26</sup> That included Rice's, for he was the country's leading "Shaksperian Clown."<sup>27</sup> In 1848 he brought his Hamlet to the hamlet of Hannibal. "Dan Rice's Multifarious Account of Shakespeare's Hamlet" was a companion piece to "Dan Rice's Version of Othello," the "Hamlet" longer at one hundred-four lines, and more markedly humorous. Both of them appeared in an 1859 songster, a published collection of song lyrics and speeches, this one called *Dan Rice's Original Comic and Sentimental Poetic Effusions*.<sup>28</sup> When the *Hannibal Journal* edi-



# Chapter XXIII



TRAGEDY.

Well, all day him and the king was hard at it, rigging up a stage, and a curtain, and a row of candles for foot-lights; and that night the house was jam full of men in no time. When the place couldn't hold no more, the duke he quit tending door and went around the back way and come onto the stage and stood up before the curtain, and made a little speech, and praised up this tragedy, and said it was the most thrillingest one that ever was; and so he went on a-bragging about the tragedy and about Edmund Kean the Elder, which was to play the main principal part in it; and at last when he'd got everybody's ex-

pectations up high enough, he rolled up the curtain, and the next minute the king come a-prancing out on all fours, naked; and he was painted all over, ring-streaked-and-striped, all sorts of colors, as splendid as a rainbow. And—but never mind the rest of his outfit, it was just wild, but it was awful funny. The people most killed themselves laughing; and when the king got done capering, and capered off behind the scenes, they roared and clapped and stormed and haw-hawed till he come back and done it over again; and after that, they made him

An illustration from *Huckleberry Finn* showing the more respectable (i.e., clothed) version of the *Royal Nonesuch*.

tor sneered at "neighboring presses" for applauding Rice, he may have had in mind the May 16 St. Louis *Daily Reveille*: "... his new readings of Shakspeare are inimitable, and he gives that *touching one*"—italics winking the joke—"called Hamlet, to-night."

Hamlet, the Dane, of him just deign to hear,  
And for that object lend at least one ear,  
I will a tale unfold, whose lightest word  
Will freeze your soul and turn your blood to curd.

...  
Whose ghost was he, so dismal and unhappy?  
It was, my eyes! The ghost of Hamlet's pappy.

...  
Well Hamlet was astonished at the news,  
And swore by jingo, with prodigious rant,  
To kill his uncle, pa and mother, aunt;

...  
... and so they all did die,  
Which is so dismal that it makes me cry—  
Hububaluh-boo-boo-boo-a first-rate story  
Some die for love, some they die for glory.

More than mere burlesque, it is a complete, verse account of the play, like Cliffs Notes in rhymed couplets. Here is a possible influence, even a model, for the pastiche Twain wrote. While differences in the two burlesques are manifest, both Twain and Rice are driving the joke, to share with a knowing audience. Here, the concluding line's iambic rhythm is awkward—"Some DIE for LOVE, some THEY die FOR glo-REE"—but as an exception, it was a concluding comic touch, what actors called a "button" to the scene, and clowns now call a "blow-off." Antebellum audiences, experienced with Shakespeare's poetic line, would have gotten the joke.

But attitudes about Shakespeare were changing, as Laurence Levine has explored in *High-brow/Lowbrow*. Once broad-based antebellum appreciation shifted to the late-century assumption that it must be highbrow, with comprehension requiring education and elite sensitivity. As part of this shift, Shakespeare became a cultural weapon, a club to wield against the presumptively less refined. The Bard of Avon, itself an aspirational label, was becoming a cultural marker of sophistication. That club can be seen bluntly wielded against Rice by the *Hannibal Journal* editor in 1848. So when Twain satirized the coarse Duke and King, and mocked those "pretty well down the State of Arkansaw," he was not reciting history. After all, "judging or writing history objectively was not among Twain's many talents."<sup>29</sup>

Instead, he was balancing his memories with Gilded Age biases. In any case, employing phony Shakespeare as mockery was already a cliché. In 1855, the April 1 Philadelphia *Sunday Dispatch* concluded its praise of Rice with the same joke, and the same state as primitive exemplar, that Twain would employ three decades later:

As [actor Edwin] Forrest is to the legitimate drama so is Dan to the sawdust, and throughout the entire South and West the universal cry is "Hurra! for Dan Rice!" ... Some wag says that the passage in the "Merchant of Venice" about a "Daniel coming to judgment," is the only thing that gave Shakspeare a literary reputation in Arkansas.

The changing cultural notions that rendered Shakespeare an elite taste pushed popular comedy in the other direction, deeming Twain a purveyor of "mere" amusement and now characterizing clowns as symbols of unrefined simplicity. While Twain's reputation subsequently rose, clowns have stayed low. Ironically circus historiography participated in the diminishment, ignoring or hiding Rice's sophistication. About the time Twain was writing down riv-



erside Shakespeare as paltry stuff, the 3 June 1883 Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette* inaccurately sneered at Rice as an illiterate “with a handsomely bound copy of the great William’s works open before him, when, had his life depended upon it, he could not have spelled out a single word of the text.” Rice, attuned to his culture even in decline, participated in this devaluation to fit himself to the emerging expectations of the clown as mere antic buffoon. He bore false witness against himself, claiming that his Shakespeare had been simple-minded stuff, no more than twisting Macbeth’s “Is this a dagger I see before me?” into “Is that a beefsteak I see before me / With the burnt side toward my hand? . . . as palpable / As that I ate for breakfast this morning.”<sup>30</sup> So it is understandable that Walter Blair dismissed Rice’s “Shakspeariana” as merely “the japes of a painted circus clown.”<sup>31</sup>

As the decades passed, this clown’s sophisticated use of Shakespeare became culturally incomprehensible, while this comic writer’s book became treated as history, and their overlap in *Huckleberry Finn* lost. Yet stripped of encrusted interpretation, Twain’s “Hamlet’s Soliloquy” sounds less like a parody of ludicrous frauds and more like a gloss on—or copy of—performances he had enjoyed. Like Rice’s “Hamlet.”

### Royal Nonesuch and Rice Humbug

The bluster and bravado Twain gave his charlatan pair matched Rice’s appealing audacity, which shone in his publicity biography, *Sketches from the Life of Dan Rice, the Shakspearian Jester and Original Clown*. A picaresque precursor of *Huckleberry Finn*, it cobbled together actual events from Rice’s early solo career, exaggerated incidents, and ancient tall tales. For instance, it pictured Rice foiling Mormon prophet Joseph Smith’s fake walk-on-water, which repeated an 1834 anti-Mormon slur from Smith’s early days in Ohio.<sup>32</sup> Decades later, Twain echoed one of Rice’s yarns. Whether he heard Rice tell it during that 1848 performance in Hannibal or read it later in *Sketches*, he crafted a strikingly similar story. In Twain’s version, after his two swindlers decide their shabby Shakespeare is too refined, they turn to the Royal Nonesuch scheme. Twain combined two jokes here. The first is the act itself, a ridiculous display in which the King cavorts on all fours, naked and painted in stripes and circles. Twain based it on an obscene version presented or rumored along the river, though he also recalled himself in a similar performance the year after Rice’s first visit to Hannibal.<sup>33</sup> The charlatans know that the hint of something racy will entice the locals, so they announce that ladies and children cannot attend, a ban that lures half the town to the show. Swindled, the locals nearly riot, but as the Duke anticipated, restrain themselves when they realize that those who missed the show will mock them. So they leave and convince the other half of the town to attend the second night, so all will be duped. The third night, everybody shows

up, intending revenge. Anticipating that too, the Duke and King take their money, pay someone to tend the door, and instead of heading to the stage and the crowd waiting for the show, run to escape on the river. This is the episode’s second joke, their clever escape, which works perfectly.

It worked perfectly for Rice too, in the version he brought to Hannibal. It combines two events from his early career. The Council Minutes of Davenport, Iowa of 30 March 1844 record the first of the two, when the Mississippi river town granted a license to Rice for a solo show of songs and feats of strength.<sup>34</sup> Four years later leading a circus, he was steaming down the river toward Hannibal when he returned to Davenport, setting up his tent outside town limits to avoid the \$20 municipal license fee.<sup>35</sup> The solo tour and his later dodge of the license meet in *Sketches*: Dan is an itinerant strongman who performs in Davenport, then skips their license by threatening the sheriff and escaping across the river to Rock Island. The next night Rock Islanders flock to Rice’s show to hear his account of their cross-river rivals’ humiliation, but to prevent being cheated too, they station their sheriff to watch him. Once the hall is full, Dan asks the sheriff to tend the door for late-comers. Then, like Twain’s two scoundrels, he only pretends to go backstage but instead grabs the money and runs to escape on the river.<sup>36</sup> The elements in the respective yarns match: A waiting audience, eager because of what happened at a previous performance; a local worthy tending the door so everything looks legitimate; and the performer appearing to head backstage but escaping on the Mississippi with the money.

Twain’s Picasso-like approach—bits of circus placed in odd perspectives—extends to other parts of *Huckleberry Finn*. The word “circus” is the most obvious example; Twain’s fondness for equestrian amusement manifests itself in a dozen instances of the word in the book. Predictably, most appear during Huck’s visit to the circus itself, but three pop up later in Chapters 26 (circus in England), 34 (Tom Sawyer compared to a clown), and 39 (snakes and rats in a circus over Jim). The Chapter 34 comparison spotlights the clown as the epitome of ambition: “If I had Tom Sawyer’s head, I wouldn’t trade it off to be a duke, nor mate of a steamboat, nor clown in a circus, nor nothing I can think of . . .” Twain limited the comparison to “duke” and “mate” in the manuscript but, as if to emphasize the importance of circus, added “clown in a circus” to the book.<sup>37</sup>

Rice allusions sprinkle the book. When the charlatans compare their respective lines of work in Chapter 19, the Duke’s list—printer, patent medicine peddler, actor, mesmerist, singer (singing-geography teacher), lecturer—exactly repeats the jobs *Sketches* attributed to Rice, with a single exception. That exception, printer, was Twain’s early career. “One-horse” was old slang for something of little account but Twain’s uses, twice in Chapter 20, and again in 21, 32, and 33, would have recalled Rice’s “One-Horse Show”



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fied by the brilliant scintillations  
of his wit every person—man,  
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Dan Rice, in his fifth decade as a clown and humorist, appeared in 1883 in Elmira, Twain's summer home. Note the appeal to nostalgia: "Old Dan Rice."

Handbill. Author's Collection.

and the underdog twist he gave it. Similarly Chapter 32's steamboat "Lally Rook," after one that plied the Mississippi, would have reminded readers of one of the era's most celebrated poems, Thomas Moore's "Lalla Rookh," and one of the era's most celebrated animals, Rice's tightrope-walking elephant, Lalla Rookh.<sup>38</sup> (Perhaps this allusion assuaged Twain after he dropped a notion to have Huck ride an elephant out of the story.<sup>39</sup>) The humorists shared another tale, of a raft with a dead boy in a barrel and a grief-stricken father. Writing about the barrel with its morbid cargo floating behind the raft, Twain inserted the incident in *Huckleberry Finn* but, concerned about indelicacy, deleted it and shifted it into *Life on the Mississippi*; prompted by scholarly opinion, the editors of the 2003 edition of Huck's adventures re-inserted it in Chapter 16.<sup>40</sup> A story of a similarly laden barrel on a raft made its way into a twentieth-century Rice hagiography, though this time as a sour joke about the dead boy in a water barrel and people unknowingly drinking from it.<sup>41</sup> The unattributed Rice tale could have come from Twain; he could have borrowed it from an old Rice yarn; or the source could have been an older river tale each employed in turn. Another possible connection is blackface, a form Rice famously purveyed and Twain famously enjoyed, possibly beginning with Rice's Hannibal performances. While the issue of the black voice in *Huckleberry Finn* remains fraught, from accusations of racism to celebration of Twain's understanding, including a claim of the origin of Huck in a black child, the echoes of minstrelsy resonate.<sup>42</sup>

These bits of "Riceana" may mean nothing individually, and



even in aggregate cannot prove that Twain consciously included them, but they combine with the larger echoes in *Huckleberry Finn* to suggest the conjunction of Rice and Twain, the one looming large in antebellum America culture, and the other masterfully weaving that culture—and that clown—into his work.

### Circus and Twain's Structure

After Clemens left Hannibal, he became a steamboat pilot. From November 1860 to March 1861, steaming back and forth to New Orleans, he certainly read the regular newspaper praise of Rice and his circus in the Crescent City. Considering Twain's fondness for amusements, it is likely that he attended too. A particular draw would have been the Southern sympathies Rice expressed in the ring, harmonizing with the sympathies that would soon lead Clemens to fight briefly for the Confederacy, before battle frightened him away. Their careers then traveled different paths, one to Nevada, the new name Twain, and an upward rise, the other to apparently greater glory, with boasts of \$1,000 weekly pay, that hid the beginning of Rice's decline. Changing tastes made his outspoken style seem crude, and favored what was coming to be labeled "decorum": quiet audiences and quiet performance modes. Rice's decline also stemmed from residual annoyance at his Civil War politics. The 3 November 1866 *Clipper* snapped sarcastically at Rice's politicking in the ring as his "sacred lecturing tour," as it applauded Twain's lectures in California two weeks later.



Autocrat of the Department of Comedy, comes the Hero of the Day—  
**The Great Shaksperian Jester and Original Clown;**  
**The Gentleman, the Scholar, the Poet, the Tragedian;**  
**The Orator and whilom Preacher,**

**DAN RICE!**

In the noon-day refulgence of whose wit, the facetious attempts of all other Clowns pale and glimmer with a feeble and uncertain light. High and low, rich and poor, the ennuied man of the world and the simple maiden, all alike bear testimony to the purity of his wit,—polished as the steel, and like the steel ever ready and true. His name is in all mouths—his fame not limited to this hemisphere, and the most exalted among men have been pleased to forget the cares of the world and the anxieties of business, whilst revelling in the lucubrations of this eccentric genius, whose humor, so spicy and racy as always to be sparkling, effervescing and bubbling over, bids defiance to the essays of the most skilful limner.

A page from Dan Rice's Sketches (1849).

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals



Within three years, "The Great American Humorist" Rice was flattered by imitation when the comic writers Josh Billings (Henry Wheeler Shaw), Petroleum V. Nasby (D. R. Locke), and Twain toured as "The American Humorists."

A decade and a half later Twain was a successful author but stuck trying to write his Tom Sawyer sequel. Tom seemed long gone, and Twain didn't know what to do with Tom's pal. He had quit the Huck Finn manuscript in 1876, picked it up once more in 1879, and abandoned it again. Then in 1882 he decided to return to Hannibal, revisiting what he remembered as a boyhood idyll, with memories that had sparked his creative imagination. But he found no youthful paradise, only ugly reality; everything seemed materialistic, shabby, degraded. In Twain's return, nostalgia exploded like an overloaded steamboat boiler. Worse, his trip forced him to consider that his fondly remembered Eden had its own shabbiness, including the shame of slavery. But the disillusioning shock of his visit energized his writing. Returned from his trip, no longer blocked, Twain leapt into Chapter 22. He had left Colonel Sherburn as a cold-blooded killer—"Sherburn" will "sure burn" in hell for gunning down a harmless man—and made notes that he should die, with a mob poised to lynch him.<sup>43</sup> Now, to signal his new theme of meretricious society, Twain flipped that individual villain into a representative hero standing against a cowardly crowd, expressing the author's disgust at "the average all around." Finishing the book with a "burst of energy," Twain turned the second half of Huck's adventures into a savage satire.<sup>44</sup> What had begun as a children's tale, companion to the amiable *Tom Sawyer*, became darker and deeper.

The shift can be seen in a writerly quirk, apparently unnoticed before. Through the first half of the book, Twain incorporated a unit of time or a number into nearly every chapter's first paragraph. Chapter 1 had "one time or another;" Chapter 6 included "couple of times" and "two or three dollars;" Chapter 10 incorporated "after breakfast;" Chapter 18 loaded in "first aristocracy," "every morning," "Sunday," "first," "half a minute," and "a week," and so on. Exceptions showed in chapters starting with dialogue but once the dialogue ended, the narrative quickly got to numbers as well. Twain may have consciously anchored the start of each chapter in these practical details of time or numbers, or it may have been authorial habit as he struggled with his *Tom Sawyer* sequel.<sup>45</sup> Whatever the reason, returned to his manuscript after his disappointing, energizing trip to the Mississippi, Twain eliminated that habit. Starting anew with Chapter 22, he crafted a full, chapter-opening paragraph with neither number nor unit of time. Full of energy and creativity, he began with a strong image: "They swarmed." And so did the paragraph, the circus episode, the rest of the book; they all swarmed. Unblocked—and unnumbered—Twain made his words fly.

Yet before plunging fully into attack mode, he paused to

pen his love letter to the sweeter, innocent aspects of circus. That may have been prompted by a new encounter with a star from his boyhood, Rice. As Twain traveled west to the Mississippi, he stopped briefly in Indianapolis, on 19 April 1882. A few days earlier and a hundred miles away, Rice also aimed west, starting in Cincinnati with John Robinson's circus on a comeback tour that made national news. The following spring the clown played Elmira, New York, not long before the author prepared to restart the novel at his family's summer home there. Did Twain's return home become entwined in his mind with Rice's return to the circus?

Whatever brought circus to mind, the questions remain. Why prettify the old-time saturnalia of circus he had known, which was ripe for the satire he exercised elsewhere? Why this sentimental anomaly in an unsentimental book?

Reconsideration of the book's structure suggests an answer. Granted, some have denied that it has any structure, and is instead "jerry-built," "a loose, baggy monster of a novel."<sup>46</sup> However, Twain's paean to circus did generate at least enough of a structure to organize his material, for that episode stands in the center of the book. To the extent that a novel can have a quantifiable center, that circus centrality is exact, halfway into Chapter 22, which is itself halfway into the forty-three chapters. With Twain's stretcher of a circus in place, the book turns on that pivot, wheeling to its new satirical direction just as the riders wheeled in the ring. Of course a work of fiction is not a linear distance with a measurable midpoint, and *something* has to be in the middle of every book. Moreover, Twain added chapters 13 and 14 after he had come to the end so he may never have intended the circus to be central.<sup>47</sup> Yet even as he "discovered his story, episode-by-episode, as he went along," Twain can be envisioned filling out the second half of the novel to balance on the pivot of Huck's circus.<sup>48</sup> A scholar has written about Sherburn's denunciation of the mob, that its importance "may be underlined by its position at the exact center of the novel," but that is off-center, at the start rather than in the middle of Chapter 22; the *circus* stands in the center—"the exact center"—of this central chapter.<sup>49</sup> Even if the book's "framework is faulty," this focal point of the circus suggests a stronger organizing principle than has been realized.<sup>50</sup>

Separation of the circus from adjacent episodes emphasizes that centrality. Twain starts and ends the circus sequence with no transition, as if to isolate it. When the mob dissolves, Huck says, "I could a staid, if I'd a wanted to, but I didn't want to," then immediately, simply declares, "I went to the circus." There's nothing about slouching around, or wondering about Jim, or heading to the circus lot, not even "I *then* went to the circus." Huck simply leaves the mob and announces he's at the circus. (That abruptness reinforces the association of violence and circus: An angry mob and a circus jostle in adjacent lines.) After the performance, Twain sends Huck away in another sudden jump. One moment the



boy is talking excitedly that he'd never seen a bullier circus, "and whenever I run across it, it can have all of *my* custom, every time." Next, again with no intervening words, he is at the rogues' Shaksperian Revival. Drastic shifts in tone highlight this isolation. Huck is shaken by the angry volatility of the mob but he suddenly changes to bubbling excitement at the circus. Just as suddenly, he shifts back to the matter-of-fact manner Twain gives him throughout the rest of the book. The drastic jumps in time, the shifts in tone, and the isolation of the circus episode emphasize centrality. If the book's picaresque adventures are a river of events, the circus episode is an island, set tranquilly apart from the turbulent flow.

### Circus and Twain's Theme

Twain crafted *Huckleberry Finn* in oppositions: civilization against nature, life ashore versus the two-person paradise of the raft. In this fictional world, human society is second-rate or corrupt; though a few individuals are exceptions, they fade into the background when the "dominant culture is decadent and perverted."<sup>51</sup> All ashore is "false, dishonest, hypocritical . . . an uncomfortable place for a free spirit such as Huck"—and for Twain, standing outside "a society dominated by sentimentalism, vulgarity, cruelty, and dying religion."<sup>52</sup> By contrast, nature shines. Except when the dregs of civilization intrude, all is glorious on Twain's Mississippi River, and he anchors the book on the bond between the two "natural" souls, Huck and Jim. Twain's evocative descriptions of life on the raft, in the heart of nature, are some of the most celebrated passages in American literature.

The circus in Chapter 22 disturbs this dichotomy between realism and romance. Though circus is a resolutely human enterprise, Twain endows it with the same reverence he gives nature. Life ashore may be "a world without innocence," but this exception rises in the innocence flourishing ashore in the circus ring.<sup>53</sup> The lush imagery Twain devotes to night on the raft and to the growing dawn in Chapter 19 matches the lushness of the circus sketch. Consider his masterful evocation of the riders' increasing pace, from the "balanced construction" of paired words and phrases—"side by side," "no shoes nor stirrups," "easy and comfortable"—to the "rolling tripartite gait" of "gentle and wavy and graceful" or "tall and airy and straight."<sup>54</sup> Layer by layer, detail by detail, Twain paints equally alluring pictures of floating under the nighttime sky and of performing under the canvas tent. In his "profound ambivalence" about the South, Twain makes "the river a bewitching illusion;" the circus he depicts turns out to be an equal illusion.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, if the goal of an illusion is to pass unnoticed, the circus episode may be more "bewitching" for never having been noticed as such. In addition to the comparable sumptuousness, both river and circus symbolize freedom. In a novel famously



Mark Twain looking sober and respectable, a contrast to Rice's pose, on page 8, at roughly the same age. Photograph, c1858. Special Collections, Vassar College Libraries

about escape, Huck rarely expresses a wish to stay anywhere, except the river and the circus. After the thunderstorm in Chapter 9 Huck conveys homey content: "Jim, this is nice," I says. "I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here." Later he declares a comparable desire to stay, in effect, with the circus, his wandering joined to its peripatetic path: "whenever I run across it, it can have all of my custom, every time." Twain treats the human institution of circus as virtually a force of nature, like the Mississippi, with both distinct from the book's other human institutions.

Though Twain's sentimental circus interrupted his thematic opposition, it perfectly fit the emerging cultural sense of circus. Completing a major shift in its place in American life, this robustly adult form became increasingly associated with children, with circus sentimentalized as a place of innocence. Gossip about racy shows gave way to prattle about wide-eyed moppets. The growing sentimentality included nostalgia. Nostalgia was not new to circus, having been integral to the form since its beginning. A scant half-century after the first American circus, the 4 February 1854 *New Orleans Daily Delta*, lauding Rice, dipped into the lyric



# An Old Landmark.



THE BARCLAY STREET ENTRANCE.

The average New Yorker does not seem possessed of much sentiment concerning the old landmarks of the town. When business demands the sacrifice is generally made, and of the old buildings and popular resorts of a century ago but comparatively few remain. In 1806 on the block now bounded by Vesey, Barclay and West streets, but what was then a common, was erected The Bare Tavern, so named after the man who owned the ground on which it was erected. At that time The Bare Tavern was considered out of town almost, and the building of an hotel in that locality was a rather daring venture. But though it was rather in the suburbs, The Bare Tavern flourished and soon became popular with the men about town of that period and with the politicians who came to the city on national matters.

The Bare Tavern is known to modern New Yorkers as Everett's Hotel, but old settlers remember it by its former name, and tell with zest of the gatherings that were held within its walls, and of the old-time celebrities who have enjoyed its hospitality. Van Renselaer, the patron

of Albany, always made it his headquarters while in the city; it was also the headquarters of Aaron Burr, and it was beneath this roof that he met the celebrated Madame Jumel. It was here that Burr spent the night previous to his duel with Alexander Hamilton, and it was from the river's bank, in front of the house, that he embarked in a small row-boat, in the early morning, to go to the fatal meeting. When Captain Bartlett was proprietor of the hotel he entertained General Jackson, then President, with a part of his cabinet, and the Indian Chief Black Hawk. Among the literary men who used to frequent this house was Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Bryant and N. P. Willis. Old Commodore Vanderbilt and his friends were also frequent visitors of the establishment.

As the years have gone by and the city has grown, far beyond the most extravagant dreams of the oldest inhabitant, the business of the hotel has grown. Samuel H. Everett, whose name the house now bears, was proprietor for about twenty-three years. His mistake was politics. He was elected to the New York Assembly and then essayed to higher fame; the financial strain was too severe and the hotel passed into the hands of trustees, Messrs. S. Herkimer, President, Peter J. Hickey, A. B. Thacker, Isaac Dixon, Charles Mulford, well-known business men of the city, who are at present conducting the business.

Under its present management the Everett Hotel enjoys a large run of patronage. The dining room runs through from Barclay to Vesey street, and is two hundred feet in length. Between twelve and fifteen hundred guests are fed every twenty-four hours in this large dining room. The cuisine and service are good; the bill of fare is always lengthy and seasonable, and the bar is stocked with the best liquors. The best attention is given the regular and transient guests, and no effort is spared looking to their comfort by the Superintendent, Mr. George Bennett Washburne. The welfare of the lady guests is looked after by Mrs. Alta Pemberton, the housekeeper, a lady who well understands the needs of an establishment of the kind.

Many staunch business men of the country make the Everett their stopping place when in the city, and many who have known it for a lifetime stop there to meet old friends and chat over the days long gone.

stream of "early memories . . . the old brook, the quiet old horse . . . Who cannot recollect the first time he ever went to the circus show?" That old-time fondness for the old-time days of circus mushroomed. By the time Twain was writing *Huckleberry Finn* another three decades further along, it had become a dominant way of presenting and perceiving it. So the rowdy adult pleasures in the original faded into a rosy glow of adorable clowns and wee ones, eliminating circus as a locus of serious concern. Of course many writers have cast a serious eye at circus but for its symbolism, like the circus in Charles Dickens wrote in *Hard Times*, as an alternative to harried-somber-constricting modern life. Though these symbolic uses may be profound, over the years they have matched the sappiest circus publicity. Scholars and shop clerks, pushcart vendors and poets—*everybody* learned the new cultural message, so often repeated as to seem ancient and inevitable fact, that circus is a sweet amusement for innocent children.<sup>56</sup>

The resulting condescension has skewed scholarship, nearly erasing a century's history of this major American enterprise. Blair sniffed at "the clown's memorized jests" in Huck's circus, while Andrew Jay Hoffman labeled the boy "grossly naïve" for being fooled by the pretend drunk, blithely declaring he could "supply the obvious answer" to the trickery, the same answer as Blair's, that the clown's jokes were memorized.<sup>57</sup> However this interpretation is not obvious, and the implicit scorn is misplaced. Experienced performers routinely deliver spontaneous comments, and Rice, Twain's model, garnered a national reputation for it. And even if Huck's clown rehearsed his "spontaneity,"

Dan Rice's article on the Everett Hotel, where he and Twain had both stayed, in Texas Siftings. Clipping, ca. 1890.

Author's Collection



that does not indicate mediocrity, as these scholars imply. All performers practice, and part of their skill lies in making certain elements look as if they are being done for first time. That's what the best actors do; that's what Twain's pretend drunk did. That's also what the ringmaster at Huck's circus does, though his skill at seeming to be fooled by the drunk appears to have gone unremarked in the literature. Compared to Huck's other adventures, this circus is an "honest show."<sup>58</sup> It is not historical analysis but conventional condescension to nineteenth-century performance that assumes this first-rate circus employed a second-rate clown. Nor does the fooling require a gullible audience, as disparagement implies. Performance often contains deception, and sometimes the easiest people to fool are those who proudly regard themselves as detached observers, just as Hoffman would "supply the obvious answer," which was incorrect. In any case, the passage suggests the clown was excellent and Huck's admiration reasonable, whether excellence lay in spontaneity or preparation.<sup>59</sup>

This was not Twain simply giving his readers what they desired, a nineteenth-century version of market research. He desired it too. "If ever a writer was imprisoned in his own boyhood, clearly Mark Twain was."<sup>60</sup> As he wheeled deeper in his book into a troubled, troubling look at humanity, the circus remained a haven of innocence for him as well. A biographer has argued that Clemens invented the persona "Mark Twain" to distance himself from the insecurity of his Hannibal past, when he was a "cowed, uncertain, and underdeveloped boy-man."<sup>61</sup> The inherent conflict between the wild past of circus and the sugary image Twain wrote echoed a personal conflict, as he wavered between his private past, which often rubbed raw, and his adult, public respectability. As Clemens/Twain took up his pen again in 1883, he knew he would make his new book darker. He excused Sherburn's cold-blooded killing to register his own disgust at the "average all around," and he turned his confidence men from harmless rogues humbugging dull crowds into a dangerous pair who would bankrupt girls and sell a fellow human being into slavery. Yet condemning human society, Twain could not force himself to go the whole hog, as they said at the time. As Leo Marx expresses it about a related issue, Twain needed "a sublimation, as it were, of the conflict."<sup>62</sup> The sentimentalized circus provided the sublimation of this conflict, between Twain's nostalgia for the past and the utilitarian present. As he stood on the fault line between yearning for his boyhood Eden along the Mississippi River and scorning the degraded culture he encountered as an adult, his fictional circus flashes a last fluorescence of purity, before the swing to fierce satire. His description of the motion of a raft from *A Tramp Abroad* could apply to himself, and the benefit Huck's circus offered: "it calms down all feverish activities, it soothes to sleep all nervous hurry and impatience; under its restful influence all the troubles and

vexations and sorrows that harass the mind vanish away, and existence becomes a dream, a charm, a deep and tranquil ecstasy."<sup>63</sup>

In *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*, Kenneth S. Lynn wrote that the country was ready for a new comic image of itself when Twain came along, replacing the clown of Southwestern tales.<sup>64</sup> Accurate as far as it goes, Lynn's is primarily a literary study, skipping performance, that era's major means of communal understanding. In the process, he ignores Rice, America's comic image in the flesh. While Twain has been metaphorically compared to the icon Uncle Sam, the same claim has been made for Rice.<sup>65</sup> He certainly looked the part in his stripes and tail coat, top hat, and nationally famous goatee, and he reached a vast audience, spread democratically from the illiterate to the elite.<sup>66</sup> While Twain made his own effort to fuse the clown and the gentleman, he had as a model Rice's powerful blend of the comic and refined in his role as the original American Humorist. However, the cultural landscape was turning from Rice's rowdy, oral engagement of boisterous crowds. Newly fashionable was Twain's "newly lettered and newly leisured mass audience," one that sought to see itself as dignified.<sup>67</sup> Where rowdy audiences had once held public sway, Twain depended on the privacy of the library, with public readings an extension of that more intimate appeal. Twain's words on the page clearly read better than Rice's in the ring, cobbled from various accounts, but to compare the two American Humorists without Rice's inflections or facial expressions, and absent the embrace of his turbulent crowd, is like trying to understand the power of a great singer's voice by reading lyrics. (Contrary to later stereotypes of circus clowns, Rice mixed broad and subtle expression.) Twain worked hard to fit himself to the new cultural fashion of refinement. The comic writer of backwoods yarns yearned for respectability. While he succeeded, that success created an internal conflict. He felt cut off from the rowdiness he had enjoyed as a youth, which was the wellspring of his writing. Shelley Fisher Fishkin reinforced that point in the foreword to *A Tramp Abroad*: His "success had provided him with the very bourgeois respectability that, while making him usefully accountable to family, friends, and the community at large, had also made him feel trapped, perhaps a little angry and resentful, and for all his hard-won social power . . . surprisingly impotent."<sup>68</sup> As the cultural taste for quiet grew, Twain provided a glimpse of the change in that book: "I do not see how an actor can forget himself and portray hot passion before a cold, still audience."<sup>69</sup> Despite this disapproval, his own work was helping persuade Americans to become still in the name of refinement.

In an ironic twist, while Twain's career as a performer grew, Rice became a writer, concluding his working life writing pieces for *Texas Siftings*, a humor magazine.<sup>70</sup> Rice noted the crossing arcs of their careers, joking in the 2 March 1890





This image from Dan Rice's Sketches (1849), shows a variety of equestrian acts.

The Ringling Museum, Tibbals

New York *Sun* that Twain stole his material. Twain may have noticed as well. By report, he remained ambitious to be a circus clown.<sup>71</sup> He may have unconsciously forged one other symbolic link between them. In Chapter 25 of *Tom Sawyer*, finished as Rice was still trouping as a clown, the two boys discuss what to do with their new fortune. Huck declares he'll have pie every day and "go to every circus that comes along," while Tom piously counters that they should save their money. Young Sam Clemens was like Tom, mischievous but ultimately respectable. Dan Rice represented a thrilling alternative as a circus great, both in the symbolic stance outside normal society and in his stories of a wild life. Daguerreotypes display the difference. Sam Clemens, twenty-four in 1858, is steady and solemn as he looks in the lens, typical pose for a responsible member of society. A decade earlier, the first daguerreotype of Rice, twenty-six, shows him defying decorum in 1849 with a roguish grin. While Rice tried to be respectable like Tom, he was the Huck that Twain wanted to be.

### Conclusion

Victor A. Doyno wrote "that all of Sam Clemens' life experiences . . . had prepared him to write this book."<sup>72</sup> True, "no analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* can fix its proportions of abstract ideas, elemental warmth, nostalgia, clowning, and political commentary."<sup>73</sup> Yet Twain's life experiences, and likely influence, significantly included circus and its clown-

ing. The rowdy antebellum original has been obscured by scholarly neglect and sentimentality about circus, including Twain's superlative example. He crafted a sentimental vision of circus so winning that it has become a prism through which we now see nineteenth-century circus, as if it were simply another a slice of antebellum life as it was genuinely lived. Beyond craft, Twain's masterful depiction burrowed deep in cultural consciousness because he crafted an image of childlike innocence that Americans wanted to believe about circus, about the past, about themselves. Sculpting a sentimentalized version, Twain slipped in a parade of circus references, as if he could not bear to expunge the raw and refined original that had stimulated him.

Dan Rice and Mark Twain were leading lights of the nineteenth-century's comic galaxy, two pole stars of comedy. But a funny thing happened on the way through that galaxy, the goateed clown waning as the mustached writer waxed. Rice ultimately faded into obscurity so deep that few have heard of him, or know him only in those sentimental fictions, while Twain's star shot him into an iconic status so high that his opinions became oracles, and his own fictions seemed history. So Rice's shadowy presence in *Huckleberry Finn* has been mostly ignored, and the central role of circus, distorted and sentimentalized by Twain, has been missed. To reconsider the influence of Rice and antebellum circus on Twain is to open a new window on this great American book. **BW**



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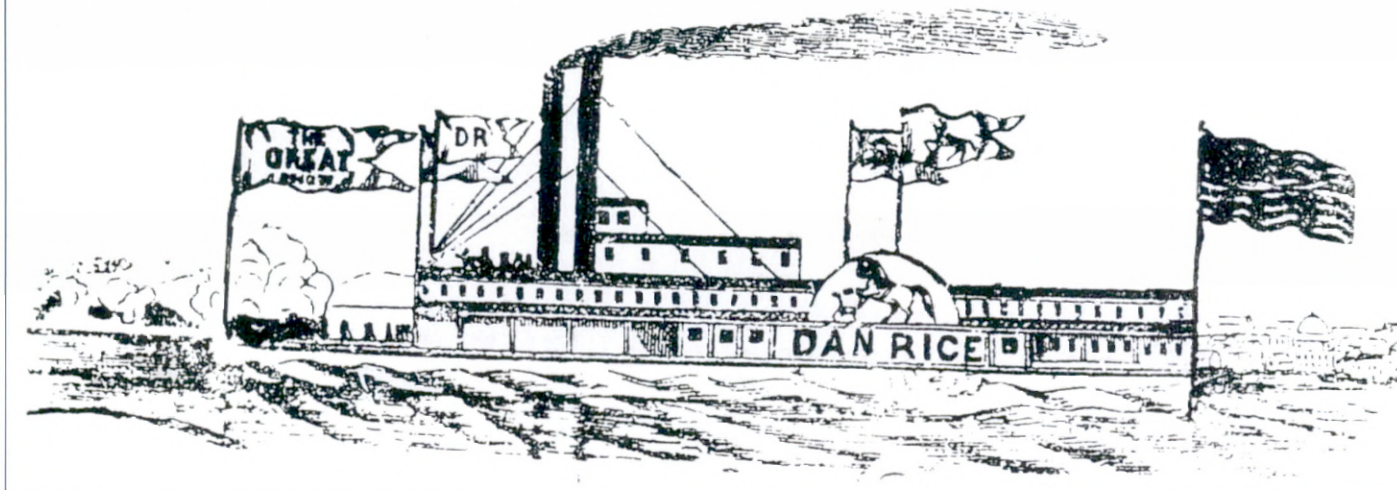
## Biography

An independent scholar, David Carlyon has published in academic journals, the *New York Times*, and *American Theatre*, and is author of *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard Of* (2001). He has taught at Northwestern University, the University of Michigan-Flint, and Iona College. He is also a member of the California Bar Association, an Army veteran (military policeman), and a former Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus clown.

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9. In 1870 two Wisconsin circus men, Dan Castello and William C. Coup, approached Barnum in his retirement to ask for the use of his name in the show that would eventually become Barnum & Bailey.
10. Both Wecter and Blair cite Brasher (135) in making their mistake, though she did not refer to the 1852 "gester" review. She made her own mistake, mentioning Rice but citing a source that did not include him.
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40. George A. Speaight, "A Note on Shakespearean Clowns" *Nineteenth Century Theatre Research* 7.2 (Autumn 1979): 93-98.
41. *Dan Rice's Original Comic and Sentimental Poetic Effusions* (New Orleans, 1859) 14, 1.
42. Rice probably wrote neither parody. The *Spirit of the Times* of 8 May 1841 printed the same "Othello" (120), attributing it to the April issue of the *Dublin University Magazine*.
43. Budd, 125.
44. Maria Ward Brown, *The Life of Dan Rice* (Long Branch, N. J.: Author, 1901) 172.
45. Blair, 301.
46. *Sketches*, 13-25.
47. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, The Mormon Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1946) 84.
48. Twain-Fischer, 438-40.
49. Hearn, 264-67.
50. Neither Hearn or Fischer and Salamo notes that the Nonesuch description ("the king came a-prancing out on all fours, naked; . . . it was just wild . . . and capered off behind the scenes . . .") looks very much like the tale Twain told on himself pretending to be a bear: "I stripped to the skin and began my practice. . . . I threw myself into my work with an abandon . . . I capered back and forth from one end of the room to the other on all fours . . ." Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924) 126.
51. Council minutes, 112.
52. Joseph S. Schick, *Early Theater in Eastern Iowa: Cultural Beginnings and the Rise of Theater in Davenport and Eastern Iowa, 1836-1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939) 188.
53. *Sketches*, 65-71.
54. Victor A. Doyno, *Writing Huck Finn: Mark Twain's Creative Process* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) 206.
55. Twain deleted other uses from early drafts, including Sherburn's unsettling laugh like one heard at a funeral, not at a circus (Doyno, *Writing* 44-45, 97). A count on Stephen Railton's website, "Mark Twain in His Times," shows that "circus" also appears thirteen times in *Tom Sawyer*, and five more in *Life on the Mississippi*. "Tom Sawyer" itself may be an indirect circus reference. The internationally renowned prizefighter Tom Sayers, who would have been as familiar then as Muhammad Ali or Michael Jordan a century later, bought a circus to capitalize on his name (*New York Clipper* 26 Oct. 1861 [218]). On other possible sources of "Sawyer," see Alan Gribben, "'I Did Wish Tom Sawyer Was There': Boy-Book Elements in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*," in Sattelmeyer and Crowley, 160-61.
56. Twain-Fischer, 445.





39. Twain-Fischer, 485.
40. Twain-Fischer, 114-19, 407-09.
41. John C. Kunzog, *The One-Horse Show: The Life and Times of Dan Rice, Circus Jester and Philanthropist* (Jamestown, N. Y.: Author, 1962) 267-68.
42. James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis, eds. *Satire or Evasion: Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).
- Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African American Voices* (New York: Oxford, 1993).
43. Twain-Fischer, 436-37.
44. Victor A. Doyno, "Afterword" in Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 1885 (New York: Oxford, 1996) 13.
45. Carl F. Wiecek has examined another use of numbers, the thematic "forty" and "two." Carl F. Wiecek, *Refiguring Huckleberry Finn* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2000) 93-104.
46. Marx, "Mr. Eliot," 434.
- Solomon, 246.
47. Doyno, Afterword, 16.
48. Doyno, *Writing*, 94.
49. Jane Johnson Bernardete, "Huckleberry Finn and the Nature of Fiction" *Massachusetts Review*, 9 (Spring 1968): 209-26.
50. DeVoto, 89 and 93.
51. Henry Nash Smith, "A Sound Heart and a Deformed Conscience" *Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Smith, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 87.
52. Everett Emerson, *Mark Twain: A Literary Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000) 151.
53. Fred Kaplan, *The Singular Mark Twain* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) 395.
54. George Mayberry, "Reading and Writing," *The New Republic* 1 May 1944: 608.
55. Arthur G. Pettit, *Mark Twain and the South* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1974) 79.
56. Bloated sentimentality prompted a linguistic reaction. In the 1870s iconic use flipped into ironic use, as "circus" came to mean a commotion or, less politely, an obscene display by prostitutes. (John J. Jennings, *Theatrical and Circus Life* (St. Louis, 1882) 520.
- The titillating usage could still be found in the 1950s, in John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (New York: Viking Press, 1952) 580. A sardonic observer like Twain would predictably employ the ironic meaning, and so he did, placing Jim in a "circus" of rats and snakes at the Phelps' farm. Nevertheless, Twain's primary use remained the one his readers then expected, the sentimentalized one.
57. Blair, 316.
- Andrew Jay Hoffman, *Twain's Heroes, Twain's Worlds* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) 37.
- Hoffman also complained in *Twain's Heroes* that it meant nothing when Huck declared "there may be bullier circuses . . . but I never struck them yet," because "never" must refer to the two months of Huck's narration (38). More reasonably, Huck's emphatic "never" means never-in-his-life.
58. Doyno, *Writing* 241.
59. Scorn seems to be lifting. In the twenty years between editions of *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*, Hearn deleted a dismissive reference to "backwoods circuses," 1981 (220) to 2001 (261).
60. DeVoto, 49.
61. Andrew J. Hoffman, *Inventing Mark Twain: The Lives of Samuel Langhorne Clemens* (New York: William Morrow, 1997) xiii.
62. Leo Marx, "The Pilot and the Passenger: Landscape Conventions and the Style of Huckleberry Finn" in Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 59.
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65. Twain, *Tramp*. Budd, 11- 44.
66. Carlyon, *Dan Rice*, 410-11.
67. Justin Kaplan, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983) 57 and 94.
68. Fishkin, xxxvi.
69. Twain, *Tramp*, 95.
70. The articles Rice wrote included one about New York City's Everett Hotel, a retreat popular with entertainers, where Rice lived in the 1890s and Twain had stayed himself.
- Carlyon, *Dan Rice* 401; "Everett Building." *New York Songlines*: 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. 8 Mar. 2008. <<http://home.nyc.rr.com/jkn/nysonglines/4av.htm>>; Sanborn, 408.
71. Robert Edmund Sherwood, "Here We Are Again: The Recollections of An Old Clown" *Saturday Evening Post* 21 Nov. 1925: 11.
72. Doyno, Afterword.
73. Budd, 104-05.

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# WAYNE McCARY

## After his first circus flopped, 40 years of success followed

by Lane Talburt with photos from The Eastern States Exposition Archives

Wayne McCary's first attempt at producing a circus was an artistic success—and a financial flop.

Two years out of college with a degree in business administration and a major in marketing, the 22-year-old premiered the Royal International Circus (a title he still owns) at a stock car race-track just outside of Waterford, Connecticut. It was September 1966. The stand-alone 90-minute outdoor event was staged on two consecutive weekend nights. "It was a great show, but nobody came," McCary recalls almost a half-century later. "I'd probably be exaggerating to say that if we had a few hundred people combined that would have been a lot. It was pretty much a blank. Fortunately," the veteran showman adds, "I was smart enough to have the race-track finance it."

McCary took away three valuable lessons: (1) produce a quality performance, (2) promote the event extensively, and (3) use other people's money. A fourth element—wrapping the circus in a one-ring format—followed the native New Englander throughout most of his career as circus producer, talent booker, civic arena executive, and one of the foremost fair managers in North America.

"My goal was always, always quality," he stresses. "And I felt if we did not have the resources and talent to do it, I would back away from the enterprise . . ."

That this formula proved successful can be summed up quite simply. "For the overwhelming most part, the people who have financed enterprises that I have been responsible for have made some significant profits. And that's important."

*Wayne McCary with his star on the Big E Walkway of Circus Stars in 2009*



Among his accomplishments as a financial rain-maker in the entertainment business, two stick out—fair executive and circus producer. Both virtually overlapped during a 40-year period and both revolved almost exclusively around single-ring circuses. McCary believes he holds the record among modern-day producers for longevity in both the Shrine and fair circus venues.

### Big E Circus Founder

From 1968 to 2012, McCary was associated with the Eastern States Exposition, the Big E Fair, as it is affectionately known in the Northeast, which dates back to 1916. In 1970 he originated that fair's first free circus, a two-day event originally housed in a horse arena. It grew into a 17-day Big E Super Circus that annually draws upwards of 80,000 spectators to it three-a-day tented performances. McCary also broke new ground in the early 1970s at the West Springfield, Massachusetts venue by introducing the concept of free concerts by celebrity artists such as Diana Ross and the Supremes, and pop vocalist Jessica Simpson. Ross and her Motown group failed to fill the fair arena because, as local media noted, most fairgoers couldn't believe it was a non-paying event; later Simpson attracted a record-high 25,000 in 2004.

During his tenure at the fair, attendance increased from 600,000 during its 10-day run in the mid-1960s to a then-record 1.3 million visitors over 17 days in 2012. That was the last year McCary was responsible for planning the event—his final in a 21-year tenure as president and chief executive officer. (The fair had grown to 12 and then 17 days in 1994.) The Big E eclipsed that record in 2013—more than 1.4 million passed through the gates—with Eugene Cassidy, whom McCary hired onto the fair's staff in 1993, as his successor.





*Crowds on the Big E Midway*

The exposition grounds also hosts more than 120 events other than the fair each year, including several highly touted horse shows.

#### **'Maine Shrine Dates' Producer**

In addition to his increasing responsibilities at the Eastern States Exposition, McCary found time from 1968 to 2005 to bring the circus each spring to Maine audiences who crammed National Guard armories and other small buildings to witness top-drawer performers under auspices of the Kora and Anah Shrine Temples. For several years his Shrine route also took in Manchester, New Hampshire; and four towns in the New Brunswick province of eastern Canada. Among the notable acts were Karl Wallenda's high wire troupe, Albert Rix's big cage bear routine, Guy Gosling's Royal Bengal tigers, and Reggie Armor's troupe, the Flying Armors. Without the financial power of this combined route, he emphasized, it is unlikely circus-goers in off-the-beaten-path communities like, say, Presque Isle, Maine would ever have been able to see performers of such significant stature.

(Following McCary's withdrawal from the Maine dates, two other Shrine producers divided his route. Hamid Circus was awarded the Kora Temple's northern tier performances

at Lewiston, Portland and Augusta. Hanneford Circus Royale picked up the southern tier—Anah Temple dates at Bangor and Presque Island. These arrangements will continue through 2014, McCary says.)

Unlike many Shrine producers, McCary had no background or interest in being a performer. He never owned circus paraphernalia or the trucks to transport such items as ring curbs, lighting, and sound equipment. He contracted for all services. Nor was he involved in the concessions end of the business, leaving that high-profit part of the business to his sponsors.

#### **Produced Shows for Packs' Widow**

McCary's circus producing experience was entirely not confined to the one-ring format. Following the death of long-time producer Tom Packs, McCary stepped in to help the St. Louis showman's widow produce indoor three-ring shows for Shrine organizations in New Orleans and Wichita, Kansas, in November 1970, and the following summer tour in stadiums in West Virginia, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Among his standout performers was the future Shrine circus producer, Tarzan Zerbini, and his caged wild animal routine.

Throughout his career, the savvy showman had the benefit of working both sides of the talent street. On one hand



## MAINE SHRINE RINGMASTER



### Mastered Details of Acts

by Lane Talburt, photos by John Tremblay

"I worked every year when Wayne McCary produced the Shrine circuses in Northern New England, and they were a feather in any performer's cap if they could get on the bill there."

Charley Van Buskirk is proud of his 35 years on McCary's Shrine dates, initially as an unicyclist, later as ringmaster and still later managing those annual springtime engagements.

"I worked with (McCary) so long that we almost had telepathy," Van Buskirk said. "When I managed the show for him, which I did pretty much from '84 on, I was always pretty sure when I made a change or made a decision that it would always come to my head, 'Is this something Wayne would want?' And it usually was."

"We thought pretty much alike. That's one of the reasons I loved working for Wayne, because we shared the philosophy of the business...respect for both the acts and the people. And his feeling was always that he wanted each act to shine to the very best. Lighting, music, and everything. That's one reason he always stayed with a one-ring format."

McCary agrees the arrangement has been akin to a

mutual admiration society. "Charley and his wife, Joyce, were originally credible unicycle performers and had a very nice act"—the Cyclonians, McCary recalled. "In one of the early years (of the McCary produced Maine dates), I had engaged them to perform with their unicycles, and I found them to be smart, compatible, talented people."

"At that time Charley and his wife were working out of another agency in Boston called the J. C. Collier agency, which was a spinoff from the Hamid office. They were beginning to develop Charley as an announcer for some of their fair dates. He would go in and present the unicycle act with his wife, and he would do double duty by announcing the show. So I had an opportunity to see him do that, and the opportunity was there where we needed a ringmaster and I brought him on in that capacity. And even today Charley is announcing half of the Maine tour under the Hanneford banner in Bangor and Presque Isle."

"Charley is a wealth of knowledge about the performances over the years up there and has done an excellent job," McCary said of his long-time friend. "His voice, I think, is synonymous with the circus in Maine, and he became highly respected by our sponsors."

Van Buskirk's stentorian tones, but not his name, are familiar to hundreds of thousands of fair-goers who flock through the gates of the Eastern States Exposition in West Springfield, Massachusetts. That's because McCary contracted Van Buskirk some years ago to introduce free entertainment acts on the Big E's open-air main stage and to record and deliver promotional announcements for the fair's PA system.

Van Buskirk made his unexpected debut as ringmaster in 1960 in a one-ring, outdoor circus at a Buffalo, New York. He and his wife, Joyce, were performing a unicycle act on the Paul Miller-produced free show at a shopping center when "the ringmaster got into an argument with some people, and he just wasn't there one morning. We were doing five shows a day, and everybody else on the program either couldn't speak English, or were wearing clown makeup or had an accent you could cut with a knife."

"They tried the show-owned tailcoat on me and it felt like it was made for me. And they stuck a whistle in one hand and a microphone in the other and put me out in the ring." Forty-three years later, when interviewed by this writer on April 16, 2013, during intermission at a Shrine date in Wilmington, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, Van Buskirk continued to cut a dashing figure in his top hat, which sat atop his shoulder-length silvery mane accented by an equally distinguished white



mustache. The Aleppo Shrine engagement marked his sixth year of calling the shots on a number of Struppi Hanneford-produced shows in New England.

Van Buskirk describes his announcing style as "sort of classic for the most part, but I do not talk down to my audiences. I do not use a smaller word if the larger one will work better. I flatter my audiences with enough intelligence to understand what I'm saying..."

"I'm the liaison. I'm the guy who speaks for the performers, who for the most part don't speak to the audience, and I introduce the performers to the audience."

Among the principal attributes of a ringmaster, he contends, "vocal quality helps, but also a command of the language and an understanding of the acts he's working with. I mean if (a trampoline artist) says, 'Well, right after I do the double full to the shoulders,' if you don't know what a double full is, you're in trouble. So the fact that I was a performer myself helps a great deal. And I think that always helps."

Born in 1940 in Rochester, New York, he was introduced to the ring as a 1½-year-old riding a two-wheel bike in his father's stilt-walking act. He began performing with his dad on the unicycle at age 3.

As a young adult Van Buskirk introduced his solo unicycle routine on King Bros. Circus and later presented a ménage routine with

"Dare," an show-owned American saddle-bred stallion, on Vidbel's Old-time Circus.

He took his unicycle act to McCary's Maine Shrine dates in 1970 and had been working with the circus producer in a series of increasingly responsible roles—including performance director and assistant to the managing director. He and his wife continued to showcase their unicycle talents through 1997. When his vocal talents are not being deployed, Charley and Joyce live on a 56-acre, heavily forested farm in the upstate New York village of Savona.

"I've worked with the Flying Alexanders, and Fay Alexander was the guy who doubled for Tony Curtis in Trapeze. And I've worked for or announced five of the eight generations (of the Wallendas). And the current head of the troupe, Tino Wallenda, is a very good, close personal friend of mine. In fact, when he took a show over to Taiwan, China, a few years back, he did me the honor of asking me to come over and announce it. I don't do Mandarin, but apparently they wanted somebody to speak English."

As demonstrated at the Aleppo Shrine performances in April 2013, Van Buskirk is still strong of voice. "I love it. I've been doing this sort of thing all my life, and I can't conceive of life without doing it."





he was promoting performers as their booking agent for appearances at fairs, parks, and circuses. At the same time, he was booking many of them for his own circuses.

In his first full-time job out of college and National Guard duty, in 1967 McCary booked circus talent for the Lordly & Dame agency in Boston at local and regional fairs. He had initially come to his employers' attention when he signed talent through that agency for his ill-fated racetrack circus in Connecticut. He also appeared on the radar scope of the then-Big E Fair executive Bill Wynne in 1970. That's when McCary, on behalf the Boston agency, persuaded Wynne to ditch traditional paid entertainment events featuring high-dollar stars such as Jack Benny, Arthur Godfrey, and Roy and Dale Rogers. In their place he proposed staging a free arena circus, using Lordly & Dame talent, of course.

### Booked Country Stars at Fairs

The enterprising young agent also branched out on behalf of the agency to ink country and western singers for fair dates. These included Jeannie C. Riley, and Barbara Mandrell, who has credited McCary for helping launch her solo performing career. The promoter originally had booked the Mandrell Family on numerous regional fairs.

The Boston agency also recognized McCary's inherent

abilities to enhance the financial performance on another segment of the entertainment business—placing circus acts during the summer months at long-established amusement parks in the Northeast. With the combination of his own Maine Shrine route and the outdoor gigs, the enterprising agent was able to provide many additional working days for independent circus acts throughout the year.

One of those benefiting from his largesse was Charley Van Buskirk, who served as ringmaster for most of McCary's Maine Shrine dates. See sidebar story on Van Buskirk.

McCary expanded his resume to include managing the Cumberland County Civic Center in Portland, Maine, in the mid-1980s.

In a highly competitive business where who you know and what you know can easily determine an individual's success, Wayne McCary excelled.

Early on, McCary had both feet firmly planted on the circus and the carnival business. He vividly remembers at age 12 staying late to help tear down a merry-go-round operated in New London by the touring Middletown, Connecticut-based Coleman Bros. Shows. In subsequent years he spent considerable time observing the operations of other major rail-based carnivals such as the Strates Shows and World of Mirth Shows, which annually targeted New



Wayne McCary with the band organ he commissioned for the Big E Midway.

Photo by Lane Talburt



London because of its importance as a Navy town. McCary's father was not a circus fan. However, his uncle was a fire marshal and that gave the youth considerable access to the midways and backyards of visiting circuses such as the tented Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey and the King Bros. He continually built on that early experience, growing his knowledge of circus and carnival routes as a youthful subscriber of *Billboard*.

### Upgrading the Big E Midway

One of his first duties as a full-time staffer at the Big E was to help turn around a lackluster and under-performing midway. It actually was a drain on the exposition's profitability. Leap forward: One of his proudest achievements in recent years was to attract the international unit of North American Midway Entertainment (NAME), to the fair's lineup of major attractions. Next to gate receipts, that carnival provides the largest revenue for the fair.

McCary is proud of expanding livestock shows and, perhaps even more important, featuring a bevy of animal acts on his annual Big E Super Circus (its title was changed in 2013 to Big E Circus Spectacular).

"Families want to see well cared for animals in the circus," he declared. "They have always been and in my opinion will always be one of the biggest draws."

Pointing to the growing opposition by animal rights advocates in recent years, McCary adds this retort: "People show what they value and what they think at the box office. And in our case here, a million, three-hundred thousand people, I think, is a wonderful referendum on this issue."

With this background on circus and carnival-related issues, it's no wonder that G. Wayne McCary became the first individual with fair management experience to be elected to the board of the Outdoor Amusement Business Association in 2000, and to serve as the trade group's chairman in 2009. He also was inducted into the OABA Hall of Fame in 2013 and, following his retirement at age 70 from the Eastern States Exposition (where he earlier was enshrined in the fair's Walkway of Circus Stars with a plaque at the entrance of the Big E Super Circus), McCary has continued as OABA's point man on international circus issues, serving as vice president of the Monaco-based *Fédération Mondiale du Cirque*.

In addition, he was a 2001 inductee to the Hall of Fame of the International Association of Fairs and Expositions. The Wayne McCary Tent No. 178 of the Circus Fans Association of America was established in 1998.

McCary married a West Springfield native, the former Annette E. Agnoli, in 1977. For the past 27 years, the couple have lived in nearby Longmeadow, Massachusetts, a convenient seven-mile commute to the fairgrounds.

In a series of interviews, McCary shared his thoughts on the decline and disappearance of circus acts at many



*McCary in Toronto*

amusement parks while television has benefited premiere circus performers. He also looks to the future of the fair and circus industries. The interviews, totaling more than three-and-a-half hours, have been condensed and edited for this article.

*McCary:* I was born on June 26, 1942, in New London, Connecticut. My father, Richard McCary, was a welder at General Dynamics Electric Boat. In fact, he welded the first nuclear reactor in the Nautilus submarine. My mom, Bessie, was a homemaker. I grew up near Ocean Beach Park, which was a summer beach resort on the coast of Connecticut. And as I got older I developed a great fascination with all the excitement that went on at the beach.

It also happened that my uncle, Thomas McCary, was a fire marshal in the City of New London at the time, and he happened to be a great carnival and circus fan. Of course, in his position as fire marshal he came to know a great many people in the traveling shows, and he developed quite a rapport with those folks and often had backstage access to them and it was really he, and my grandfather as well (who) had a similar interest. They began taking me behind the scenes probably when I was five or six years old. By the time I was in the first grade, there was a frequent game—I remember it well—in the class the teacher would go around the class and ask everybody what they wanted to be when they grew





*The Big E rides today*

up. And when they got to me I would say, "I want to run away with the circus." That would throw the teacher into a quandary. So my interest and affection for the circus really developed at a very young age.

One of my favorite memories was my grandfather taking me down to the railroad yards to watch the Ringling show unload. Even then I was more fascinated with watching the show unload, set up and tear down than I was in the actual performance.

*Q. So do you recall some of the earlier circuses and carnivals?*

*McCary:* Yes, the first circus I remember seeing was a truck show called Biller Bros. Circus. It was framed with entirely new equipment and it was out probably two or three seasons. They used to play New London in late August on their way out of New Brunswick (Canada). And then I spent a great deal of time on the Hunt Bros. Circus, which played a tremendous number of spots in Connecticut and was easily accessible to me as I was growing up. And I remember seeing the King Bros. Circus a couple of years. It was probably the largest truck show in this country. At one time they moved on about 65 semis, and also for a number of years had a significant street parade. Luckily for me, New London, because it was a Navy town, was a frequent destination for a lot of major circuses as well as small ones, and also the big carnivals of the time. Shows like the World of Mirth, which, of course, was a railroad show. James E. Strates was another railroad show. Trell's Broadway Shows, the Vivona brothers. Of course, Connecticut's Coleman Bros. Shows. So I spent as much time on all of them as possible growing up.

## Attracted to Logistics

*Q. Did you meet any of the performers? What really caught your interest?*

*McCary:* Thanks to my uncle I met a lot of the Hunt family, for instance. I met Clyde Beatty, and had an opportunity to know the Coleman family, which is a venerable carnival family based out of Middletown, Connecticut. I subsequently worked for them on the road as well as Ocean Beach Park. I actually tore down my first merry-go-round on a Coleman Bros. midway when I was 12 years old. I don't know whether I was more pleased to be part of the crew or that I got a chance to stay out all night. However, I think I was really interested in the logistics and fascinated with how they could move operations like that, in the case of the circus on a daily basis.

I discovered probably at 10, 11, 12 years old a publication called *Billboard*, which was the bible of the industry at that time. It had a lot of what was going on in the business and, very important to me, it had the routes of all the shows. I knew

them backwards and forwards. I would walk about three miles to the store to buy *Billboard*—there was only one store that carried it. I would hide it under my mattress and take it out after everyone went to bed and read it with a flashlight. My mom wasn't too fond of me reading *Billboard*; she was fearful I would run away with the next carnival or circus that came to town.

*Q. But you made it through high school?*

*McCary:* We had moved from New London to Waterford. I attended New London High School for two years and moved to Waterford, graduated in 1960, and was then fortunate to get a full four-year scholarship to the University of Hartford's Business School, and I graduated in 1964.

*Q. What was your major?*

*McCary:* I got a B.S. in business administration with a major in marketing.

*Q. What happened to your love of circus during these college years?*

*McCary:* (While) living in Hartford, the Shrine circus in Hartford was a major date at that time, so I spent a great deal of time there. During the summer months I was working at Ocean Beach Park either in the concessions end of the business or in the ride operations that the Colemans had there. So I had a finger in those things all the way through school. There was no doubt in my mind that I would seek to be part of the outdoor amusement industry. I wasn't quite certain whether that would be in the parks business or the



circus business or the carnival business. But I was headed in that direction.

*Q. Why marketing?*

*McCary:* It always appealed to me. Marketing relates to the sizzle in selling products. I always thought it was sizzle that sold the steak, not the steak itself. And just the excitement, the energy to try to create an aura around the product or the show . . . that appealed to me as opposed to sitting in the back room counting money or accounting.

*Q. So right out of college did you have a job waiting?*

*McCary:* Right out of college there was no clear pathway for me to get into the business that I had a passion for. So I took a job with the Hartford National Bank as a time payment loan officer. But I immediately started to work part time as a public relations director for the New London-Waterford Speed Bowl, which was—it's still there today—a major stock car raceway. That actually opened another door because I talked the owners of the track into having a circus that I would produce toward the end of the season. They thought it was a good idea, and I thought, because we attracted thousands of people to the stock car races, that those same people would flock to see a quality circus. I ended up booking the talent, my selections, through Lordly & Dame agency out of Boston.

That circus, my first circus, was a life experience because nobody came. I quickly learned that even with great talent, one of the biggest and most important challenges in the circus industry throughout history and still today is the front end. I thought you drop a few ads in the newspaper and promote the circus when we had thousands of people there for the stock car racing and they'd all show up for the circus. Of course it proved me wrong. It probably was the only circus I produced though that I actually lost money. I recall some of the performers: Harriett Beatty was there with her cat act. A very well known juggling trio, the Alm-iros Trio from Denmark; the original Merle Cook Comedy Car. And we had a flying act called the Flying Artons, and it was a flying act that David Nelson from the Nelson family television show sometimes was a guest flyer with, although we were unable to get him for the show we produced at Waterford.

### First Circus 'Pretty Much a Blank'

*Q. Tell me how that was set up. Were there two separate events?*

*McCary:* Yes. It was not in conjunction with the races; it was a stand-alone event. That proved to be a major mistake. Had it been linked as a special attraction to one of the races, that would have been a much smarter way to present that show. I learned that people don't just turn out for anything, whether it's Ringling Bros., the Eastern States Exposition. It takes a



*Karl Wallenda's troupe performing at the Big E.*

lot of work to sustain large crowds.

*Q. So as a future circus producer, what were the essentials that you learned out of your first venture?*

*McCary:* Well, although I had grown up with a three-ring circus and produced a number of them later on, I quickly adapted to the concept that a one-ring circus emphasizing a variety of quality acts might be a direction to go. Because the circus, throughout the time that I was growing up, and certainly after 1956 when Ringling folded under the big top, the circus faced a lot of competition with TV and lots of other things that were going on. But I always believed that if you had a quality show and people were entertained they would come out and see a show again, provided that you created enough buzz so that it was on their agenda or something that they wanted to do.

### Parks, Fairs Booked Circus Acts

*McCary:* At that time there was a significant number—a pool, if you will—of great circus talent available in this country that played independent dates. When we developed the outdoor agency in Boston, we had the luxury of securing a number of amusement parks in New England. Ocean Beach Park was the first, because I grew up there and knew them. Also, Rocky Point Park in West Warwick, Rhode Island; Crescent Park in Providence, Rhode Island; Eldridge





McCary with close friends and business associates Struppi and Tommy Hanneford in 2002

Park out in (Elmira) New York state; Olympic Park in (Irvington) New Jersey; Riverside Park up here in Agawam, Massachusetts; Mountain Park in Holyoke; Lincoln Park in the New Bedford area. Those parks in those years used circus talent pretty much every week. And that's when I came to know a lot of these acts because I helped them unload their equipment, spent a lot of time with them. So I had an understanding of what that aspect of the business was. That gave you a good basis to offer a performer a good summer season. All of the parks used acts at least one week, then (the acts) would flip to a new one. In the case of Rocky Point Park they always took our acts for two consecutive weeks. Then we began to add fairs to the circuit. After a few short years we were able to offer independent acts a pretty substantial summer route, because the routes grew. At one time we had probably 25 or more fairs that we were producing the shows for, Eastern States Exposition being one of those.

*Q. Give me a sense of the names of fairs, the locations and the geographic area that you covered.*

McCary: We were pretty much in the Northeast United States. I remember booking the Tommy Hanneford riding act into an amusement park called Pleasure Island that no longer exists, outside of Boston. It was the forerunner of the theme park. We played in a lot of county fairs, especially in

New York State. Fairs like Booneville, New York, (where) we would bring in probably six, seven, or eight circus acts and play a spot like that for the duration of the fair, normally six or seven days. We played other New York towns like Afton, Norwich, Malone, Westport, and Walton. We played out on Long Island, New York. We also played Keene, New Hampshire. And on occasion we would send an act to the State Fair of Texas in Dallas. We might have control, if you will, of an act for the summer months, and it may be something that a major fair outside of our territory would want. In those days we presented a formidable chimp named J. Fred Muggs that became famous I think through the Dave Garroway television show. We would sign acts like that exclusively for the summer weeks, and toured people like that. There were big acts that toured these dates, and people like the Zacchini cannons; cage acts like Albert Rix and the Johnny Welde family with their bears, Guy Gossing, Prof. George Keller; acts like Karl

Wallenda and the Wallenda troupe, the Coronas high wire family; and dozens more. So there were formidable acts to play those kinds of dates, and those were the kinds of people we sought out. We wanted to have the best talent we could to showcase our business.

### Ed Sullivan Boosted Premiere Acts

*Q. In those years, some of these summer acts could pretty well write their own ticket, couldn't they? Tell me a little bit about the arrangements with the elite versus the also-rans.*

McCary: Well, as always, there were levels of acts. There were premiere acts, and then what I would call bread-and-butter acts who did a decent job but were not necessarily what you would consider center-ring talent. These outdoor venues provided a tremendous opportunity for circus talent to be employed outside of the traditional touring circus. Hundreds of acts took advantage of it. That also played into the Shrine business, which was another tremendous off-season forum for circus talent.

And nightclubs, too, for trampoline acts, things like that. I was never involved in the nightclub business. That was another outlet for certain kinds of acts. And don't forget in those days even though television offered competition, television also was an opportunity. A lot of (circus) people just saw it as a negative, and in some cases it probably did



contribute to people—at least for a while—not attending live events and just watching it in their homes. But I saw television as an opportunity because television really gave an opportunity to add a lot of weight behind certain performers. Take the Ed Sullivan Show, which was a live, multi-variety show. At its height it had a larger audience than some of today's big shows like "America's Got Talent." Ed Sullivan's format, in my opinion, did much to make certain circus performers famous and give them a tremendous amount of work and recognition. As an example, Struppi Hanneford appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show six or seven times. Clyde Beatty was on. Each week Sullivan would feature a major specific circus act. This made stars, if you will, out of a lot of circus talent in this country at that time. It gave them name recognition and it added value to the salaries they could command. There was another TV show, "The Hollywood Palace." These kinds of shows, in my opinion, added a lot to the circus business.

### Park Circus Acts Peaked, Declined

*Q. When, from your experience, was the height of the amusement park business, when did it start declining, and what were some of the factors in that?*

*McCary:* Well, I would say that, certainly when I was growing up in the '50s and '60s, it was probably at its height. Then it began to decline, and the same thing could be said for the fairs. Every fair in this country was using a tremendous amount of circus talent, reviews, productions that were put together by various agencies. The Hamids were involved in that type of thing. And many others. But I believe as it got into the '70s, especially the later part of the '70s, a lot of these parks and fairs began to use more music talent. There was an explosion, if you will, in the concert industry and in our own company, Lordly & Dame. We began to book major artists—recording artists—at fairs. That trend continued, and most venues began to drop traditional circus acts.

*Q. So the circus acts, the variety acts, had to start competing not just with television but with the advent of...*

*McCary:* Concerts. Yeah. Name talent, and the explosion of country music. And country music, of course, was a great fit with the rural constituency of fairs. It was a perfect marriage. Name recognition drew thousands of extra people. I



*McCary with Sylvia Zerbini and John Herriott*

remember booking Jeannie C. Riley when she had a blockbuster hit called *Harper Valley P.T.A.* We played a town called Boonville, New York, probably 40, 50 miles north of Utica. Probably 2,000, if that many, live in the town. And probably 10,000 or 12,000 people came out for Jeannie C. Riley's concert that night. It's the most people that were ever in that town, and I doubt there's ever been that many people since. But that's the kind of magic that those acts brought to the fair, and to the parks as well. It was the age of the celebrity.

*Q. So what did that do to the family acts that had formerly been the big stars at these fairs?*

*McCary:* Well, it became more difficult for them to develop a full season of work. Fortunately, for those years—in the '50s, '60s, into the '70s—the Shrine circus business was really very formidable. In fact, for many years even when Ringling was touring the two railroad units, it's likely that more people attended Shrine circuses combined in this country than saw the Greatest Show on Earth in a given year. You know, the Shrine Circus started with Moslem Temple Shrine in Detroit, Michigan. The first recorded major Shrine circus in this country was in 1906. And from that beginning, at least into the '50s, probably the early '60s, there were more than 150 significant Shrine dates in this country. In addition, dozens of Shrine clubs sponsored other circuses in the country. So what did that mean? It meant that thousands of circus performers over the years had an opportunity again to fill out their season. Especially in the '50s and the early '60s when there were a significant number of touring tent shows, the tent show seasons, of course, would end sometime in the fall, the late fall. They would start up again in





Wayne McCary enjoying a Craz-E Burger on the midway.

the mid-early spring. That left a big window of opportunity for these winter Shrine dates to utilize some of the major acts that came off of those shows, and it was very successful. The Shrine circus played a big role for many years in the sustainability of a large pool of circus talent in this country [and] made it possible for these family acts that you speak of, as well as the major star circus performers, to find work outside of the summer season.

### Building Shrine Routes Elusive

McCary: There's a huge challenge today with the Shrine, largely, I think, because of the declining membership, which is typical of many civic organizations today. In 1995 *The Wall Street Journal* did a story on the Shrine that indicated their membership had declined by more than a third from previous generations. I expect that decline continues. The economics of producing a show, renting buildings, a shortage of manpower from the membership, a shortage of manpower in selling and promoting the circus in advance, combined with the economic competition amongst the producers in the business who vie for these dates—I think all these combined have contributed to current budgets today for Shrine circuses that in a lot of cases don't allow you to produce the kind of circus that you'd like to produce. Another real challenge to the future of the Shrine [circus] is that there are so many dates that conflict with one another.

One of my great disappointments in being in that aspect of the business for over 40 years was the initiative here in the Northeast of trying to get the cooperation of the Shrine temples in to work together to put a logical route together. I could have produced a high quality show, produced a production number and at a cost that would have been

favorable for the participants and, very importantly, would have allowed us to engage and tie up the kinds of acts that they need to keep people coming to the box office. I had a vision of bringing together the Shrine circus in Hartford, Connecticut; Providence, Rhode Island; Albany, New York; Springfield, Massachusetts; Manchester, New Hampshire, the Maine dates which I was already controlling—and Luxor Temple in Canada, just as a start. Unfortunately, we were never successful in convincing the various temples that it would be in their best interest and the future of their show to work together in that kind of an effort. It's important for a producer to have a route, to be able to offer good talent a number of consecutive weeks they can bank on. And that's one of the problems today.

*Q. OK. So you're making a parallel between the failure of trying to get these different Shrine temples to work together and circus producers themselves, aren't you?*

McCary: Yeah. I'm not so sure the circus producers themselves were anxious to work together. Perhaps they should have been. I think in Shrine business, though, is more in the hands of the sponsors as to setting their dates and what they wanted to do.

*Q. But there's been a history of one producer pitted against another in trying to secure those dates.*

McCary: Yes. And that competition hasn't been productive in many ways because in a lot of cases it's driven the budgets down below a threshold that makes a lot of sense in being able to produce quality shows. On the other hand you can't blame the sponsor for trying to get their best deal because you have to remember the Shrine is in the business as a fundraiser. They're not in the business primarily to promote and protect and nurture the circus industry. The circus happened to be a very good match for their objective of fundraising over all these years. So their goal is to continue to raise as much funding as they can for their projects. And the circus producers' goal is to develop and to try to maintain as many dates as they possibly can. I'm afraid in a lot of cases that producers have possibly sold ourselves a little bit short by bidding prices too low. And when you do that, of course you don't have the resources, again, to bring in and produce the kind of show that you ought to be doing.

### Animal Acts Key to Shrine Circuses

*Q. As I understand it, Hamid came to the Big E fairgrounds with a full week layover before the Melha Shrine Circus in the spring of 2013. Is that correct?*

McCary: Yes. The other issue, of course, is the Shrine circus is a family orientated show. If there's any antithesis of the Cirque du Soleil, in my opinion, it would be the Shrine circus. The heart and soul—the foundation of the Shrine circus—throughout its existence has been the inclusion of



as many animal acts as you possibly could contract for. Given the activity of the animal rights activists in recent years, those kinds of challenges have made it very, very difficult for independent performers to maintain, whether they're elephant acts or cage acts or any kind of animal performing acts in this country. The source of those kinds of acts is drying up very, very quickly. I would predict that we're only a few years away from the probability that there won't be cage acts and elephants available to play the Shrine circus dates. That will be tragic because, as I said, throughout the history of those dates animals often have been the cornerstone of those productions.

### Fewer Circus Families

*Q. What kinds of pressures has the competition between Shrines put on the performers, and particularly the performing families?*

*McCary:* A lot, and I think it has contributed to the new generations in circus families leaving the business because the economic stability is considerably different today than even 20 years ago. That's unfortunate. The pool of talent available in the United States today is far, far less than it was 15, 20 years ago. Just as there are far fewer animal acts, there are far fewer younger generation performers. Mainly it's challenging to put a season together to sustain a living.

I think the cream of the crop, the premiere acts have been able to hold their family together because there's still a lot of work for that level of talent. But acts that are not particularly in demand have had to go outside the business to supplement their income.

*Q. Has it always been that you'll find a family only doing two or three turns or more but they have added subsidiary ways to make a living in the Shrine circuses?*

*McCary:* Well, they do. Often you'll find performers' families doing two or three acts. That's something I've never been in favor of. In most cases, budget allowing, I would always engage performers for the most part to present their premiere or primary act in the show. But as a matter of survival . . . again economics, when a producer hires a family, if they can do two or three turns, it works well for the bottom line of your budget. But performers have a lot of ingenuity. Many of them wind up in concessions for the promoter or producer or, in a lot of cases, the sponsor. You'll see a lot of them hawking in the stands or behind the cotton candy machines. They will pick up extra income driving equipment for the show owner. So they use everything imaginable to stay in the business.



Wayne McCary (center) with Shrine and Big E executives

### Shrine Producer's Roots

*Q. Let's start now to take you back to your Shrine career. When was the first Shrine date you produced and where?*

*McCary:* 1967. I went to Maine for the producer of the Kora Temple (in Lewiston), which consisted of Lewiston, Portland, and Augusta, Maine. At that time the tour was produced by Ralph Bedwell. Ralph was primarily a phone promoter; he was not a circus producer. Phones and concessions were his forte, and the performance was probably his least priority. But nonetheless he obviously had to book circus acts, and he booked them through talent agencies. And in 1967 I'm not sure who he booked most of his talent through, but a few weeks before they were scheduled to open in April in Lewiston, he found that the acts he thought he had booked were not coming, not available for whatever reasons. Bedwell happened to put in a phone call to the Lordly & Dame agency in Boston that I had just joined after my premiere with the Waterford Speed Bowl circus. I immediately went to work to secure enough talent to bail him out, so he had a reasonably good show. I remember one act we were able to secure was a good personal friend of mine, Albert Rix, who had the big mixed bear act of grizzlies and polar bears. Ralph was impressed with the fact that we could turn around his show four weeks before he was scheduled to open. He subsequently asked if I would book and produce the circus starting in 1968, which I did. Then he and I approached Anah Temple, which was in Bangor and Presque Island, about joining the circuit. I believe that would have been in 1969. Unfortunately Ralph Bedwell died of a heart attack before we ever played the date. Very fortunately for me—even though I was very young in the business without





*Dolly Jacobs and Wayne McCary*

much of a track record—they decided to take a chance and let me produce their show the following year. We did add Anah Temple to the route, and the rest is history. I played those dates for over 40 years, many years without even a written contract. I think it was very, very successful. It was built around the one-ring concept using some of the significant major talent that was available. We developed those dates so that we were playing on the five-city tour to over 100,000 people, which represented about 10 percent of the population of the state of Maine at the time. (Author's note: *The Circus Report* of April 30, 1973, referred to the Maine show as "Lordly & Dame Circus." In an email dated Dec. 10, 2013, McCary added: "The two Maine temples owned all the equipment and loaned it to the New Hampshire and the Canadian temples when they were part of the tour. The early years we leased a truck to transport the equipment. I was more often than not the driver. In succeeding years we hired a tractor and driver.")

#### **Shrine Shows Attracted Families**

*Q. Tell me about the makeup of the audience that attended the Shrine circus, then and now.*

*McCary:* A great family orientation, no question about it. A tremendous number of youngsters. In Maine the Shrine circus in the spring was really a big deal. The big tent shows were folding. I'm a great history buff and I really marvel at the fact that major shows like Ringling, Hagenbeck Wallace, and a lot of others played those Maine towns as significant tented shows. But at the time I came into the business that was not the case, and for a lot of years the Shrine circus was the only circus people in Maine had access to. I was a partner with the Shrine, which I think was a good business model. I think the whole time I was there the business grew and improved virtually every year. Part of our platform was to maintain reasonable prices because that's what the market demanded. The [whole thing] was based really on trust. Their goals were similar to mine. They wanted quality circus. They wanted the one-ring concept. And it was good for all of us. There were other tours. You're probably familiar with the Texas Shrine dates. For many years I believe there was Fort Worth, Houston, Dallas, Austin, San Antonio. That was a great example of temples in a region coming together and producing their own show. Then as time went on they made a decision to hire an outside producer to do that. But there are many great Shrine circus tours in this country. Producers like Al Dobritch, (L.N.) Fleckles, George Hubler, Tom Packs, and many others who had significant seasons over the years.

*Q. Because of this continuing relationship with the temples in Maine, what were some of the acts that you were able to bring to the largely rural Maine?*

*McCary:* Certainly we got a lot of notoriety when we brought Karl Wallenda into Maine, which was not a particularly affluent state. I was always cautious and advised the sponsors to be careful that we wouldn't get greedy in terms of pricing at the box office and also in terms of selling the concession merchandise. So really the Shrine circus became synonymous with spring up there. They had a great program. Each year they bused thousands of fifth-grade children in to see the show free throughout the state. That was a great promotional tool.

*Q. You say you were in partnership (with the Shrine). What does that mean?*

*McCary:* Well it was on a guarantee and a percentage business platform, so there was a real incentive to run it as a business and to make it more and more profitable. There was an incentive for me to do that and for them to do that as well. But I always had great respect for the performers and respected the fact that the Shriners had contributed hundreds of hours of their time, you know, to make these things successful. To my knowledge during the 40 years that I managed that tour I doubt if the temples ever seriously considered switching producers. Bringing the Great Wal-





*Band organ at the Big E*

lenda Troupe up to those towns made quite an impression on the public. Every year except the last year or two we were able to bring a major act like Albert Rix's mixed cage act. And every single year I was there we carried an elephant act. We brought a variety of very impressive acts. The Tony Diano big five herd that included Big Tommy, later known as King Tusk. We brought those elephants up there before they went to Ringling. It was probably the most spectacular elephant act in the country. Tarzan Zerbini worked the dates with his big mixed lion and tiger act. His wife, Jacqueline Zerbini, who was the great single trapeze artist of all time, worked those dates. Cat acts, like Guy Gossing's fighting Bengal tigers played the dates several times. Jorge Barrada was there with his lion act. And flying acts like the Flying Armors, Fay Alexander and the Flying Alexanders, and in later times the Carillo brothers wire act before they went to Ringling—Pedro Carillo later as the soloist; Dolly Jacobs with her spectacular ring act; LaNorma had a great single trapeze act and later had a wonderful satellite rigging act. The list goes on and on.

### **An Ornerly Armory Custodian**

*McCary:* There were some limitations up there because before the advent of some of the newer buildings we played in armories where there was no place to anchor the riggings. I have a lot of great memories of a lot of stress. I remember playing in the Caribou, Maine, armory with Karl Wallenda. I always kidded him that I would join the act because the ceiling was so low I could literally reach up and touch the

high wire with my hand. Nevertheless we did the pyramid act in that building, and people thought it was spectacular to see someone of his fame in a town like Caribou. I remember clearly when we played the Augusta armory, which is a military armory. They had an ornery custodian who wasn't too happy about the general's decision to let us play the building. He was determined that we were not going to tie off any guy lines to anything in that building. Of course, if we couldn't do that, a third of the show wouldn't be able to present. So I had an idea. Somebody tipped me off that this custodian was fond of a drink or two or more. Well, on Sunday at that time in Maine you couldn't get to a liquor store. At that point I would have been happy to buy out the whole store for him. So we happened to have Walt King's elephants with us, and I remember Walt hearing me talking about the problems we were having. He said, "Well, you know, I do carry some whiskey for the elephants when they get a cold. Let me see what I might have." He went out to the semi, threw a few bales of hay on the ground and eventually dug out a bottle of whiskey covered in about three inches of sawdust. So I took it, shook it off and cleaned up the bottle. On the label it said something like "Uncle Joe's Moonshine from Southern Kentucky." I took it over to this custodian, and he kind of squinted at the label and he said, "You know, I've never heard of that stuff." I said, "You probably wouldn't, but every year I buy a case for my clients and I just happen to have one bottle left over for you." Well, he took the bottle and we never saw him again. I remember that with fondness.





*With Bello Nock and crew on the peaks of the Big E Circus tent*

### Some Performers 'High Strung'

*Q. In the process of booking these shows, it was one thing to see the personality of a performer in the show, but you saw a lot of these personalities in the backyard. I take it that sometimes the smiling personality in the ring did not exactly match up with what a performer did in the backyard.*

*McCary:* Yeah. There's a wide variety of people in the circus business, just like in any other field. Everybody's got a different personality. I think in the circus, when you're talking about entertainers, those entertainers have to have a significant ego or they wouldn't be performers. Many of them are perfectionists, and I think the combination of ego, striving for perfection—in a lot of cases their work is dangerous—and traveling, these things contributed to some of these folks being high-strung in the backyard. But first of all, I had great respect for performers. You have to start with that. I always made sure we accommodated their needs. They had parking by the buildings, they had water and electricity when they arrived. If we had down time between shows I always made provisions for them to have those amenities. I tried to develop a reputation for treating them fairly, economically, in negotiating the contracts, making sure we did what we said we would do. And I think those steps contributed over the years to a very positive relationship with the very overwhelming numbers of performers. Many became personal friends. That's not to say that there's not the occasional performer out there who disagreed with something I thought was necessary for us to do and accomplish. I always used the expression that we were working together. My role was to hire them and to coordinate what they did, but it was their job to excel at whatever their specialty happened to

be. Over the years many performers came to work for me with just a verbal commitment over the telephone. We probably never even signed the paperwork until they arrived on the spot. And again I always had great respect for their artistry.

*Q. What was the range of the Maine Shrine dates? When were they held?*

*McCary:* Mid-April. Always started the second week of April, and then we'd go into May. And then when we added Luxor Temple—four cities in New Brunswick (Frederickton, Bathurst, Moncton and Saint John), that took us way into May. And for a couple of years in the early '70s my fair and parks season would get under way by Memorial Day through Labor Day or later. And in the couple of years that I produced the Tom Packs Circus, those dates ran in July and August. They ran simultaneous to my fair dates. And then there were two big indoor

dates for the Packs show in November—Wichita, Kansas, and New Orleans. So I was on the road already pretty much year round, either going to conventions in winter months to sell talent or working to producing the show, but pretty much working from April until November with one thing or another.

*Q. Contrast that with the big shows in the cities and the types of audiences you would have played to.*

*McCary:* I think because of the one-ring venue, people had an intimate relationship with most of the shows I produced, and that's why I liked them. That relationship between the artist and the audience is captured so well in the one-ring environment where people are close to the action. I think they go home with a totally different perspective and an appreciation, if you will, of the show—of the entertainer and the artist who's working. I think with the one-ring environment the reaction in the small town and the big town is not that much different. Obviously the bigger the venue, the further away the audience gets from the intimacy of the show, and in my view there is something lost. Of course, that's why over the years big shows, spectacular shows—and certainly The Greatest Show on Earth—have tried to capitalize on how do you produce a spectacular event in a venue that needs to show to 15-, 20-, 25-thousand people, and I think they've done a spectacular job at that. But that's a different kind of challenge. And they've done it well throughout their history.

*Q. You said people in the small towns, particularly in Maine, have a different appreciation of animal acts?*



*McCary:* Yeah, no question about it. When you got into rural areas, particularly the state of Maine, there's no question that historically animal acts were the number one attraction in that environment. I think people in that rural environment have a different kind of relationship with nature, access to the outdoors maybe more so than city environments. Because of that they seemed to have a great relationship with animals. And animals have always been a high priority in booking that show.

### Times Change, but Animal Acts Vital

*Q.* I recall that back in 1934 Clyde Beatty was arrested in Pittsburgh for supposedly mistreating his charges. It happened in New York at about the same time. When did you start noticing an uptick in animal activists' actions?

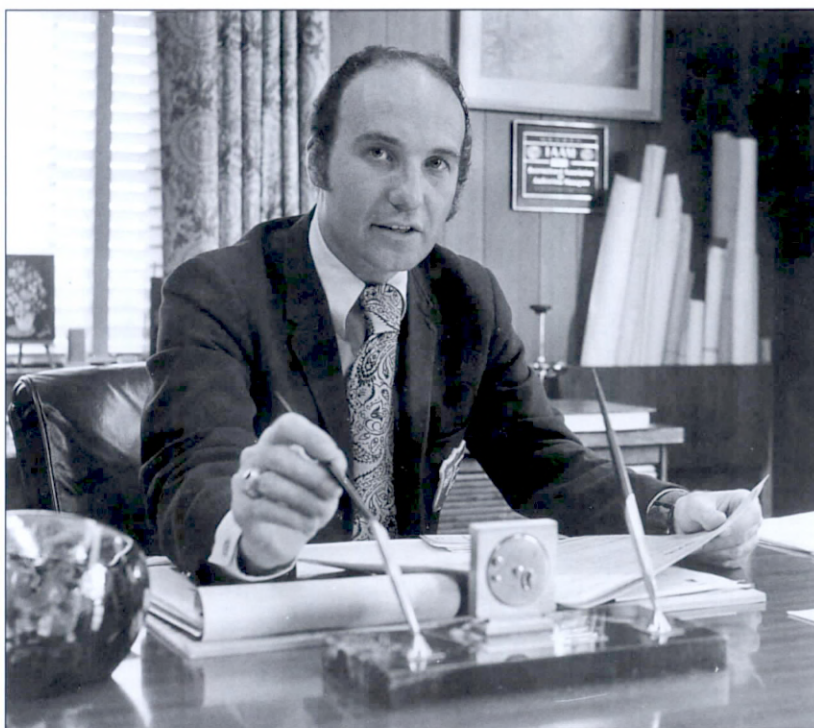
*McCary:* I don't go back quite that far [smile], but certainly Clyde Beatty was in my judgment one of the great talents in the American circus. He was an exciting presenter, and I think his style of presentation was appropriate for the day.

Times change. Earlier in my career animal activism was not as vocal and prevalent as it's become in the last 10, 15 years. It's unfortunate in many respects because the circus is one of the real opportunities many American youngsters have to come in close contact with exotic animals, to see their capabilities. Also, first of all, these animals are extremely valuable, today more than they've ever been. We all know you can't even import elephants into this country. Not every youngster in America has the means to travel long distance to zoos or animal preserves to see them. I'm a huge advocate of making certain animals are well cared for.

No one wants to see any animal abused, whether it's an exotic animal or a household pet. My experience over the years has been that the overwhelming majority of people in the circus industry who own and present animals have done an outstanding job in giving them the best care possible. I believe the lifespan and general health of these animals is much better than the conditions these animals face today in the wild where they're being poached and abused, even in reserves in places like India and Africa and the Far East. It's a shame that a small minority of people feel that the rest of America shouldn't have the privilege and the opportunity to share in the wonderful experience of exposure to those kinds of animals.

*Q.* One thing you hear frequently from animal protesters is, "Well, it's one thing to see performers smiling with their dogs in the ring, but how about in the backyard?"

*McCary:* Yeah, but again, I've spent 40 years in the backyard. In my career I have never seen an animal abused. Is there



*Wayne McCary hard at work in 1973.*

a bad apple in the animal industry? Has there ever been? I'm sure that there has, just as there are bad apples in every kind of occupation that you could mention to me. The federal government, the U.S.D.A., has very stringent regulations. They make unannounced inspections. Animals on my shows have been inspected hundreds of times over the years. I welcome that kind of scrutiny. These animals are an invaluable financial asset to the people who own them. If someone doesn't take good care of their animals, then I think we have very adequate laws to address those issues. And I support that.

### Big E Attracts McCary

*Q.* Turning back to your earlier experiences—particularly at the Big E, when did you wean away from the talent agency to becoming your own producer?

*McCary:* I really started to produce the shows as part of Lordly & Dame, but in 1973, I believe, I came to the Eastern State Exposition to work with them on a year-round basis, but not all 12 months.

*Q.* Who was the Big E executive then?

*McCary:* Bill Wynne, the former general manager of the Mid-South Fair in Memphis, Tennessee. He was one of the best fair managers in the United States. They brought him here because at that time the Big E had really leveled off. It's attendance was probably in the half-million-plus range, and it was financially challenged. They brought Bill here really to try to turn it around, and he certainly did. He laid the groundwork.





*In 1970 McCary produced his first circus for the Big E.*

*Q. So you were a staff member at that time.*

*McCary:* I was executive assistant to the manager. I had made an arrangement with them to continue to produce the Shrine dates, and I would leave the company to do that. It was actually in 1970 that we launched the first circus as part of the format of the Big E. At that time we were using a lot of television celebrities as main headliners here, with people like Bob Hope, Lorne Greene (Bonanza), Roy Rogers and Dale Evans rodeo. The circus was not part of the format. So Bill said, "I know, Wayne, you have a passion for the circus. I'm going to give you a shot. Let's try the coliseum for just two days." Well, we did, and it was very, very successful, much to a lot of people's surprise. We turned away people right from the get-go. The nice thing about the horse arena was it seated almost 6,000 people. And we used a 17-piece orchestra. William (Boom Boom) Browning, a great circus bandleader, led the band for me for a number of years. The challenge was—and youth is a wonderful thing—I didn't think there was a mountain I couldn't climb back then. One of the big challenges of having the circus in the exposition coliseum turned out to be that we had to strike the entire show every night because the building had to be converted each morning into a facility to house the exposition's premiere horse events, the competitions.

## Victor, Bobo, Tarzan and 'Tommy'

*Q. In the first year, do you remember what your inaugural acts were?*

*McCary:* I remember in some of those early years we had people like Victor Julian, who was the gold standard for the dress dog act; (clown) (Chester) Bobo Barnett, who was a tremendous artist at that time. We had big cage acts like (Charles Jean) Tarzan Zerbini, the incredible aerial work of Jacqueline Zerbini. We used the Diano elephants with Tommy (later known as King Tusk on Ringling). There was a Zacchini double-repeating cannon. Guy Gossing (tigers), Albert Rix (bears), Karl Wallenda and the original Great Wallendas. So we had a lot of the luminaries in the industry. A tremendous environment. A big orchestra like that. It's always been a free show; it was part of the admission to the fair.

Over the years it was expanded. We kept building up the number of days. I think we got it up to five days. And then it became so successful that we began to look at how we could do it for the full run of the fair. In one of the years I brought in Tommy Hanneford, one of the great riders and great comedians. In 1978, the Big E was then a 12-day exposition. In cooperation with Tommy, who had acquired a big top at that time, that was the year that we went with the circus for the full 12 days. And in 1989 Hanneford went with a European big top, and that really was the direction I wanted to take the show.

*Q. Did it start out as a one-ring show?*

*McCary:* Yeah, even when we worked in the coliseum. It was basically a one-ring show although to add some publicity to the show, one year we opened with twin cage acts and another year we opened with twin flying acts. But I always believed that with an artist really worth their salt we ought to showcase them solo.

*Q. Who were the twin cage acts?*

*McCary:* Albert Rix with the big mixed bear act, and Guy Gossing's Fighting Bengal Tigers. And I remember the flying acts, the Flying Armors because the Armors worked for me very, very frequently. For the moment it escapes me what the second flying act was. I do recall one put together for me by Billy Woods.

## Cannon Squeezed into Arena

*Q. How did the Maine Shrine dates fit in time-wise with the Big E circus?*

*McCary:* They actually coincided with one another. Also, in the early '70s there was a venerable circus on the road called the Tom Packs Circus (based in Collinsville, Illinois, just east of St. Louis). It played a lot of Shrine dates and police dates. In the early '70s, Mr. Packs had passed away and his widow, Thelma Packs, had kept the show on the road. It was



being managed by Jack Leontini and Karl Wallenda. Those folks—meaning Mrs. Packs and that management team—came to an end to their business relationship and Mrs. Packs approached me to produce the Tom Packs Circus for a couple of years. So I actually produced the Shrine circus in Wichita, Kansas and in New Orleans for the Jerusalem Temple. At that time the New Orleans Shrine circus was one of the biggest circuses in the country. That show and the one in Detroit were considered to be the premiere Shrine dates in the country. It was interesting because the first year I was booking it in New Orleans I knew we had to bring in a big, formidable show. That was the show where we brought in two cage acts. We opened with Tarzan Zerbini's big mixed cage act, and opened the second half with Albert Rix's bears. We had two flying acts. We had—it was the first time for Papa Zacchini to play the building in the old French Quarter. The problem was, I put the show together and I had never been in the building. When I arrived I quickly discovered why the Zacchins had never played that building with the cannon. There was a very small low tunnel, the only way to access the main floor in the arena. When we got the cannon in the tunnel, it got stuck halfway through. We wound up putting everybody we could get a hold of inside the barrel and deflated the tires, and I think the cannon ultimately slid through the tunnel by an inch. I was in the habit of using that spectacular herd of elephants that was then owned by Tony Diano. We had those five, and we also the (Al) Vidbel elephants. Her [Mrs. Packs] big indoor dates—Wichita and New Orleans—we played in November. We also played the summer outdoor stadium dates in places like West Virginia, Mississippi and Louisiana. But we also carried eight elephants on those dates. I always carried a double cannon. We closed the outdoor show with the eight-elephant display, the double shot with the Zacchini cannon, and seven minutes of exploding fireworks the minute that they hit the net. So those were some interesting years. That was a big show. Today, unfortunately, there are not a lot of budgets that would allow you to produce shows of that magnitude. Those of course were three-ring shows. Those Packs shows were the only three-ring shows that I did on a regular basis.

*Q. Tell me once again the first year that you produced a Shrine circus.*

*McCary: 1968*

*Q. And when was the last year? (Following a brief conference with Struppi Hanneford in front of her bus where the interview was being conducted, McCary answered.)*

*McCary: It's about five years ago. But if you go forward from '68, I produced the show for 40 consecutive years*

#### **Developed Free Acts, Grew Midway**

*Q. What other talents did you bring to assist Bill Wynne in*



*On the Big E Midway in 1976*

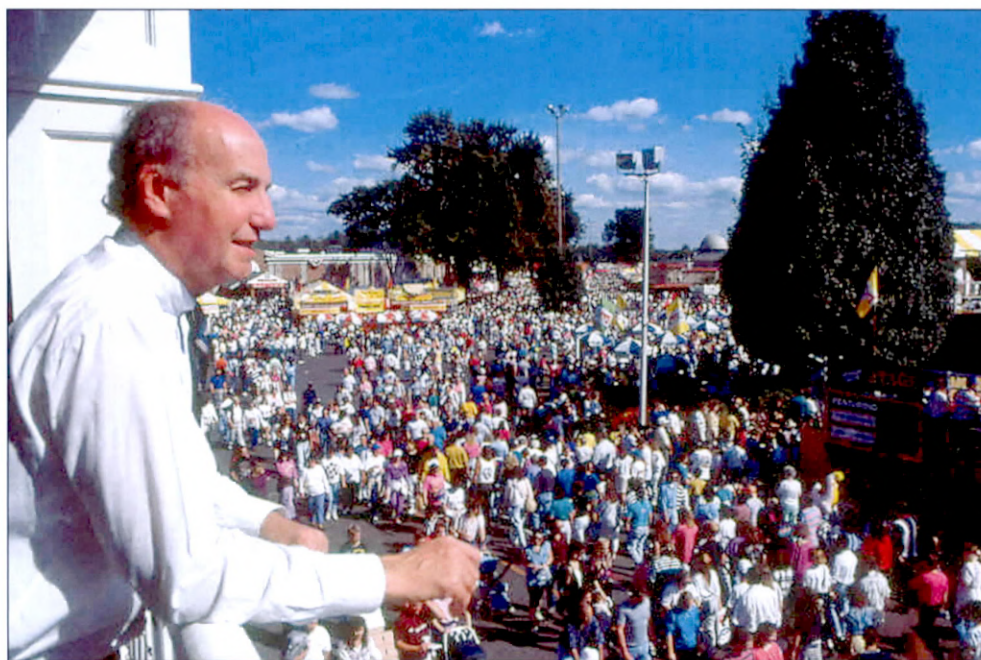
*running the Eastern States Exposition?*

*McCary: Two things: Bill Wynne and I developed the free-entertainment concept. And he discovered that I was quite knowledgeable about the circus industry and in the country music business as well. Of course those were avenues he wanted to pursue. One other thing that interested him was my experience with the carnival industry and amusement park industry. At the time the Big E's midway was not particularly productive. In fact, the directors felt possibly the Big E should function without a midway at all. Throughout the Big E's history the midway had played a secondary role. For many years the King Reid Shows provided some shows here. King Reid (real name: Reid Lefevre) was actually a state legislator in Vermont. When he died in 1969 the show passed on to other hands and was not particularly successful. So Bill Wynne charged me with cleaning up the midway and pursuing potentially new partners.*

*Q. So who did you bring in?*

*McCary: Originally we negotiated with the Conklin Shows out of Toronto, which was a formidable Canadian show. But they were not able to fit us into their route. We wound up doing business with a fellow by the name of Frank Kopcha out of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area. It was a small company called Frankie's Amusements that was growing,*





*McCary looking over the crowds at the Eastern States Expo.*

and they adapted a new title called East Coast Shows. They were able to field a much better complement of ride equipment than we had ever had. Ultimately their show was not able to keep pace with our growth here. An opportunity came about when Conklin Shows purchased the Deggeller shows's dates. And subsequently I visited and traveled to several places where they played and negotiated a contract with the Conklins. It had many years of success here. A few years ago Frank Conklin sold his show to North American Midway Entertainment, which is probably the most formidable carnival company in the United States today. They operate in Canada and the United States and have an arsenal of probably 200 pieces of ride equipment.

#### **More Rides, Bigger Crowds**

*Q. So what kind of rides did you have at that time?*

*McCary:* Pretty much standard. There were no spectaculars. One year they brought in one of the first sky wheels—the double wheel. We lacked spectacular pieces like roller coasters and other incredible pieces of equipment that were being developed in the '60s.

*Q. You also were competing with other fairs to attract major carnivals. Tell me about the competition you faced in securing good ride operating companies.*

*McCary:* While the Big E was known as a quality exposition, it was not considered a good carnival spot. Originally I had approached a number of New England-based carnivals, including the people I grew up with—the Coleman Brothers, the Gene Dean Fiesta Shows out of Boston and others—about coming here and no one wanted to have anything to do with it. They didn't feel the date would be lucrative enough

for them to give up some of the dates they were already playing. I remember spending a great deal of time when I was growing up with the founder of Coleman Shows, Dick Coleman. And Mr. Coleman always used to tell me, "Never take the show north of Windsor Locks (in northern Connecticut) and possibly not even north of Hartford. He always attributed the Eastern States poor midway fortunes to the fact that Riverside Park was such a mecca for people who wanted to ride rides and play games.

*Q. Where was Riverside Park?*

*McCary:* Agwam (Massachusetts).

Now it's one of Six Flags' most successful parks five miles up the

road from here. But the interesting thing was even before I became a part of Bill Wynne's team, when I would be here I would see thousands of people. And it always struck me that if youngsters were here on the grounds, it didn't matter if they rode the Tilt-A-Whirl or the Ferris wheel or the merry-go-round eight weeks ago at Riverside Park. They were here now, a captive audience, and they wanted to have fun. The problem was, in my opinion, the product wasn't right. The product was not attractive or appealing. Today the operation at the Eastern States Exposition is a very formidable and very profitable operation for both for us and the North American midway. It probably provides the second largest income stream to the exposition outside of its front gate. That's a revolution from when it cost money to bring the carnival here.

Today the exposition probably would be impaired financially without the tremendous revenue that's driven from the midway. And the midway is important as a draw, really the number one attraction in terms of young people coming out to the fair.

*Q. From the time that you came on staff to serve this fair...*

*McCary:* ...in 1973.

#### **Boston Market Tough to Crack**

*Q. From then, until you took over as CEO, what was the attendance from the early years until this year?*

*McCary:* Well, the attendance grew from over—the whole span of time I've been here—from probably over a half million to a million-three the year I retired. One of my disappointments was I had a goal of reaching a million-five by the time I retired. We tried a number of marketing efforts









to try to draw people from the Boston orbit. It was not as successful as we would have liked, for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which it's extraordinarily expensive to advertise in the Boston marketplace. Also, one of the underlying factors that we've never quite figured out how to overcome is the natural propensity of people in Greater Boston not to come west for anything. They think that we're the Wild West. By natural habit people in Boston tend to go north and south and not come west. I remember talking to an inspector about an issue that we had here at the exposition at the fair one year, and the inspector was trying to get a handle on exactly where we were located. He said to me, "I've never been out there, and quite frankly I don't have any intention of coming out to the western part of the state." So that's a natural phenomenon that would take a massive marketing effort to overcome. Interestingly, our polling showed that people who did come out here really liked the experience and would come back.

*Q. What was your market area and the type of people that you wanted to come to the fair? And what was the key element to bring people to the fair?*

*McCary:* The primary market was the Interstate 91 area, south from New Haven, Connecticut, all the way up through New Hampshire and Vermont; west to Albany, New York; and east primarily to Worcester and some of the fringe communities outside of I-495 outside of Boston; eastern New York state, the Hudson Valley corridor; Long Island (New York); and northern New Jersey. That would be the primary focus and the New England states, of course.

The Big E is unique among American fairs in that the six participating states—Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine—own plots of land on the fair's Avenue of States on which

*Aerial view of the Big E including the circus tent in the upper left corner.*





*The 2010 Mardi Gras parade at the Big E*

replicas of their respective state capitol buildings are situated. That allows the public to experience a taste of the six New England states. Our research has shown that for many people that experience is the Number 1 attraction of the exposition.

The Eastern States Exposition is a not-for-profit, non-governmental enterprise, which isolates it from political turf and funding skirmishes.

The Big E still maintains a very legitimate livestock competition. There's over a thousand head of dairy cattle competing here. A premiere horse show. Hundreds and hundreds of sheep are shown here. Exhibitors come here from as far away as California. So even though agriculture isn't what it was by a long shot in New England and the northeastern United States, if you're in agriculture it's still extremely important to showcase and to win here at the exposition. And I think if you combine those traditions with historic Storowton Village, with the midway that appeals to the young generation, a lot of people come here to eat and shop 'til they drop. And then I think underscoring it all is the tremendous entertainment offerings that are offered here during the 17 days. The (Big E) circus has become an icon, a must-see event by as many as 80,000 people who come here every year.

The daily parade became a part of the Big E's culture long before I came here. But as time went on, we began bringing in a variety of attractions to, again, make it a little different. In 1992, (which) I believe was the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the circus in America, we collaborated with the Circus World Museum in Baraboo. I had been out to Milwaukee a number of times to see the spectacular Milwaukee parade, which really is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for anyone who has seen it. I thought it would be a great idea to bring

some of those historic wagons back here to the Big E. We brought a dozen. And through the efforts of Bob Commerford (the owner of a large traveling petting zoo in Goshen, Connecticut, who had built a large collection of smaller-scale wagons), we were able to round up well over a hundred draft horses and ponies to pull them. A number of those wagons had not paraded in the city of Springfield since the last Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey parade that was in the (Western Massachusetts hub). Originally I had the vision that we could replicate and do that every year. But I soon discovered that having that many horses doing it safely on a daily basis was not possible. That also was one of the things that drove us into the Mardi Gras parade.

So in 2000 we had the floats built in New Orleans to the scale of the size of our roads. Our original investment in six floats was over a quarter of a million dollars. I can tell you a number of directors on my board rolled their eyes when I suggested that we were going to make that investment and produce some floats in New Orleans and stage an authentic Mardi Gras parade here at the Big E. A lot of people thought that it didn't blend with the New England culture. To be honest with you I figured it would have a life cycle of about three seasons. But it has grown every year in popularity. I think we throw over a half-million strands of Mardi Gras beads to the public.

### **Big E: Substance of Memories**

*McCary:* So really the Big E is a fall tradition for so many people. That really came home to me after the attacks on 9/11. Our exposition opened three days after the attack and over a million people still showed up here in the next two weeks. So to me the fair really represents what the spirit of America is all about, and New Englanders take a lot of pride in it. While that particular year 2011 was a very taxing, stressful year, for me it reinforced the tradition, the esteem and the value which the New England public holds a Big E experience. You know, I've always said that when you're in the entertainment industry you create memories for people. And I always took it as a personal challenge to make sure that any show I was responsible for would create a good memory. Particularly with youngsters these are memories that they carry with them for their entire life.

*Q. This is a little bit unusual with the states owning buildings, but it's one of the few fairs that does not receive government support.*

*McCary:* Yes.





*Parade wagon at the Big E*

*Q. Tell me how that's set up.*

**McCary:** This is a private, not-for-profit corporation. It's governed by over 180 trustees—that's a lot of bosses—in the six New England states. They elect a board of directors of 19 or 20. The CEO reports to their board, and everyone else serves at the pleasure of the CEO, a role I played for 21 years. It's quite unique because many of the state fairs are subsidized by the taxpayer and in recent years we've seen some, such as the Michigan State Fair, go out of business. With the downturn in the economy state legislatures are less prone to want to allocate funds for events like fairs. Throughout its history going all the way back to its origins the Big E has never been supported by the tax infrastructure. I think that's one of the things that's kept it strong. The fact that it has an independent board has shielded us from political meddling, I'll call it. I was never pressured to make political decisions. I always made business decisions and hopefully most of them were good ones . . . obviously, over 20 years some better than others. But the Big E is an economic engine for this region. We were able to invest millions of dollars during my tenure here in the infrastructure. And I think we have ramped up the quality and variety of the product itself. And I think it bodes well for its future. Surveys indicate that 90 percent of

the public plan to come back to the exposition in the future. And I've always thought that's a powerful referendum. Most places would like to see those kinds of numbers.

### **McCary Retires, Leaves Footprint**

*Q. Your last year (2012) was a bumper year?*

**McCary:** It was.

*Q. Tell me what was the attendance and to what do you attribute that.*

**McCary:** It was my final year as CEO. It was nice to see coming in with a record attendance (1.3 million). But weather is a huge factor in the ultimate results of this fair or any fair. Last year the fair was blessed with three magnificent weekends. The Big E, running after Labor Day when school is on in September, is really weekend driven. As much as you do to attract people and have good attendance during the week, the biggest portion comes on those nine weekend days—Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. And once in a while you hit the jackpot but you don't hit it every year. So attendance this year has been in the medium-plus range, as it has been for many years. Hopefully it will stay there or, hopefully, it will grow.



*Q. What are the top five fairs? You're the sixth, aren't you?*

*McCary:* Well, we're usually sixth, seventh or eighth—again depending on the weather here and the weather everywhere else. You know, they're subject to the same conditions. I would say the State Fair of Texas, which I think runs for 28 days, is the largest attended fair, probably in the range of close to three million people every year. The Minnesota State Fair would be another large one; they draw about a million, seven-hundred thousand people. But the Big E is the largest fair from Maine to Florida, east of the Mississippi.

*Q. From the first time you were associated with the fair, how has the mix of attendance, how has the demographics changed?*

*McCary:* The demographics of the Big E have been traditionally from a pretty high economic level. It's always been that way and I think partially probably because a lot of people travel a great distance from New England. In recent years there has been an outreach, i.e., particularly to the Hispanic community because as you know the Hispanic community in our marketplace has grown significantly. And that population has been gradually increasing at the fair. That demographic though has traditionally been drawn to Six Flags amusement park, for instance. So the fair has made efforts to try to make sure that we incorporate things into the program that appeal to Hispanic families and to do some advertising and marketing in their native language where it applies.

*Q. What is the mythology about people who attend the fair, and what is the reality?*

*McCary:* Well, I think for the people who come to the Big E, it's really a tradition. The Big E is kind of one of those experiences that people want to hand on from one generation to another. You hear that often. The average visitor comes here and spends one day. Of course, if you're a little bit closer or you're a circus fan or you have a special interest in some of the agricultural shows, you may come a little more often. But I think the Big E in particular is ingrained in the calendar of the public in this region.



*Wayne McCary with his family*

### **Big E Boasts No Taxpayer Dole**

*Q. So your interest in tradition leads into why you have this circus?*

*McCary:* Absolutely. And the Big E is a real fair in the essence that it still has a strong agricultural component. Many modern fairs have moved away from that, unfortunately. Here you also have the uniqueness of the Avenue of States. You have the historic, authentic colonial village. And yes, I think the tented circus in particular feeds into the history and culture of what a fair is really all about. Over the years the caliber of the talent we've tried to bring here has proven that when the circus is done well it's popular or more popular than it's ever been.

*Q. What do you see as the major challenges in the future to this fair and, from your perspective as a former OABA board member and chairman, fairs across the country?*

*McCary:* Fairs are challenged like every business by more regulation. The costs of doing business, for every business—the fair is no exception—continue to grow. The Big E is a 501(c)3; we're not a for-profit corporation. The Big E receives no local or state subsidies. That's a critical difference



here at the Big E as opposed to some other major fairs in Canada and in other parts of the U.S.

*Q. Then the fair's independence is part of your success there.*

*McCary:* Yes it is. If the Big E had been a subsidy of the state, I'm sure we wouldn't be sitting here with it open today. There is a big economic challenge out there. There's more competition for fairs than in the past. In this region you have casinos that were never part of our culture over the past 12 to 15 years, and here in Springfield within the next couple of years, there will be the advent of another major casino in the front yard somewhere off the exposition, as well as two others in the Commonwealth (of Massachusetts). These are things that compete for people's time. Yes, I always say that you've got to compete for people's financial resources, but time seems to be the biggest issue. A few years ago I caught a survey conducted of people who didn't come to the exposition. And we sort of know why people who come do so. But I wanted to know a little bit more about folks that don't. What we found was that by and large people didn't have the time to come during that 17-day span. They're too busy working, earning a living, or the youngsters are enrolled in all kinds of activities.

### OABA Tackles Challenges

*McCary:* In the amusement industry itself there also are huge challenges in finding labor to move the big shows. One of the initiatives the OABA has been in the forefront of is trying to protect a government program that's called H-2B labor. That program allows shows on a limited basis to import help in most cases from either South Africa or Mexico. It's hard to imagine how a tented show, like Cole Bros., would be able to move well without that labor. The same could be said here of North American Midway Entertainment, which employs several hundred employees from

South Africa. Now you may say, "Why do you have to bring employees from out of the country when so many people are currently unemployed in this country?" The issue isn't about money because it costs more for a show to employ a foreign worker than it does a domestic worker. Why? Because you have to pay for all that expense to get them here and home again, and all the living expenses. The paradox is that unfortunately the more sophisticated our society gets or the more educated our society is, which are all good things, the less likely it is that there are significant numbers of people who want to work the mobile industry. It isn't about wages. It's the fact that most folks today don't want to live the gypsy lifestyle that's necessary to be on the road most of the year. And there are big concerns today as to whether the government is going to continue that H-2B program.

Another major challenge in the circus industry that the OABA has taken up, of course along with the Feld organization—Ringling Bros., is the threat from animal activists that could possibly prevent having exotic animals in the circus. It has been tackled by the OABA in terms of local, state, and federal legislation. The issue is, while almost all Americans support the welfare of animals, when it comes to animal rights I think that's a different story. The challenge will continue because a small but very well financed minority of people in this country and around the world would like to see no performing animals anywhere at any time. These people are very vocal. It's sort of like our organization, and Ringling as well, trying to put out these what I call brush fires all across this country. Families want to see well cared for animals. They have always been and in my opinion will always be one of the biggest draws. The activists' efforts to minimize the exhibiting of exotics is only the tip of the iceberg. Here at the Big E, you have almost a thousand head of dairy cattle; you have one of the largest horse shows in this country; you have over a thousand head of sheep; you

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have alpacas and llamas, and so forth. And that's the heart and soul of what a fair—and a circus—is all about. And I say this: People show what they value and what they think at the box office. And in our case here a million, three-hundred thousand people, I think, are a wonderful referendum on this issue.

### Fairs: 'Family Destinations'

*Q. Let's talk a bit more about the future of fairs in general.*

*McCary:* Smaller fairs are going to be challenged by the lack of availability of carnivals. It's difficult with all the regulations and overhead for smaller carnivals to exist. I predict that unfortunately there will be fewer small fairs in existence.

In general, however, I'm very optimistic that the fair industry has a great future. I've always borrowed Coca Cola's old slogan, "It's the real thing." I think the more sophisticated, computerized, the more isolated employees become in their work life, there's still something within folks that they like to get out and experience real things in life and be close up. First of all the fair is one of the last tremendous family destinations. It brings together family. There's something at fairs whether you're five years old or 85 years old. And there's something about the energy, the excitement and the opportunity to taste life on the front lines. That's what fairs are all about, and I think the more our existence gets away from that in our everyday life the more attractive the fair experience becomes.

*Q. One of the issues of the fair, and particularly the midway, is, are the fairs and the carnivals doing enough to protect the safety of the public?*

*McCary:* Yeah. How much is enough is a question. I don't think you can ever rest on your laurels in terms of safety. It's got to be the Number 1 priority. But I believe that the ride industry—from the manufacturing to the actual execution of moving equipment, setting up, the training of ride operators—has come a long, long way. Fortunately there are relatively few serious incidents on traveling midways in this country. And again that's been a big part of the priority and agenda of the OABA as an industry—to set standards. The OABA has a program to recognize carnivals that go through a very strict compliance program. I'd certainly be very will-



*The 2010 Big E Circus*

ing to put my grandson on most rides that are operating in this country today.

*Q. When you talk about rides you talk about inspections. Give me a sense of the regulatory overview of the fair operation in generation, before the opening and during.*

*McCary:* Well, here in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts you have a very strict process. State-trained inspectors come out and go over each piece of equipment. Also you have insurance requirements. And in general there are pretty strict health code enforcements. You have licensing requirements. You have to meet a lot of strict fire code regulations. It's continuous through the operation. In the case of the Big E, when I took over one of the first things that I did was to employ third-party qualified inspectors to be on the Big E's payroll as an extra layer of protection. They're here 24/7 monitoring the operators as well as the physical equipment because obviously things can change on a day-to-day basis. I think it's been very prudent and helpful in keeping Big E spectators safe. Security itself is a huge, very expensive issue. I'm always amused when people think the taxpayers are paying for the police and fire protection. I wish that were true. Security here was always important but I think it took on a new life after 9/11.

### McCary's 'Incredible Opportunities'

*Q. We'll start wrapping up. Looking back, if there were a Y in your career path, what regrets if any do you have about taking the direction you did?*





At The Big E Circus, Wayne McCary enjoying the show.

McCary: You remind me of one of my favorite poems that was written by Robert Frost called "The Road Not Taken." That's an interesting question, and I have asked myself that. First, I've been really privileged. I've had an incredible opportunity to have started off working in the amusement park industry where I grew up. I had an opportunity to be in the carnival business as a young man and worked in that part of the business. I've been in the arena business as a manager. I've been in the booking talent agency business, booking entertainment, largely in the country music industry. And of course the fair industry and the circus industry. Sort of a jack of many trades, I suppose. But I think from the time I was a young man at Ocean Beach the circus has always been my greatest passion, the common thread. If I had traveled a different road it probably most likely would have been exclusively in the circus business. But I've had a wonderful opportunity, producing the Shrine dates in Maine for over 40 years and other shows, founding and producing the show here for 40 years; being on the board of the World Circus Federation in Monaco. And so it's just been a tremendous experience. I have met wonderful people, made many great friends from star performers to a long list of people who are hard-working people who just make it happen. I've always said at the Big E that I had a title and a set of responsibilities, but that doesn't make anyone better or worse than those you work with. I always felt strongly that with all the people who worked at the Big E and all of the people that I've worked with over a lifetime, every single one of those people was as important as I was at the time. Each one makes a differ-

ence in whether a venture is successful or not.

*Q. It appears to me that perhaps the one thing that other producers and owners of circuses might be just a little bit envious is, I don't know whether it's a maxim or not, but "use other people's money."*

McCary: Yeah, that's a good observation. The ability to be successful and do the things and be at the places that I've been and I've been able to bring along financial sponsors to underwrite those things is a little bit different. I've never really thought about that. But it's been a good way to travel and it's enabled me, hopefully, to do things in a first class manner. But I take some pride in that for the overwhelming most part, the people who have financed enterprises that I've been responsible for have made some significant profits along the way. And that's important.

*Q. Obviously that has been a hallmark of your enterprises.*

McCary: Yes. Even today they will tell you that during the years I managed the civic center in Portland, Maine, it was one of the most profitable public arenas in the New England states. So it's always been a challenge whomever I've worked for or with, it's very important that there's a bottom line that needs to be weighed. And I think my goal was always, always, Number 1: quality. That you've got to do a quality job. And if I felt we did not have the resources and talent to do it, I would back away from the enterprise and would not take up that challenge.

*Q. The less-than-spectacular showing of your first venture must have stuck in your mind throughout your career.*

McCary: Yeah, it did. It was a good lesson I learned early. You know, this is not an easy industry to be in. You know, I've had a lot of good fortune along the way and, as I said earlier, a lot of wonderful people have reached out to me and helped me to do the things that I was able to achieve. You don't do any of these things on your own. **Bw**

*This is one of a series of interviews with circus owners and producers conducted by Lane Talburt, a circus historian and a board member of the Circus Historical Society. Many of these interviews have been captured on video recording media. The author wishes to express his appreciation to Jim Foster for his editorial assistance and to the staff of the Big E Fair for help in obtaining photos and other documents for this article.*



# Dexter Fellows

## *The Master of Ballyhoo*

by Jerome Beatty

*Photographs of a selection of Ringling stars whose acts would have been pitched by Fellows are all by Harry Atwell and come from the collection of Circus World Museum.*

*Transcribed and submitted by Larry Kellogg, this article was first published in the March 1930 issue of The American Magazine, a journal that was published monthly from 1905 until 1956. Initially it was called American Illustrated Magazine, but the name was shortened after the first two years.*

It is March in New York City. In a dozen offices, editors and reporters, worn by winter, sour and snarling, are producing dull and uninspired newspapers.

The five or six million readers of these newspapers, low in mind and vitality, now jammed tight into subway cars, now trudging to work with wet feet, sniffing and sneezing, seek inspiration in vain from their favorite authors. Everything they read only confirms their suspicions that the whole world has gone to pot.

In March Father Knickerbocker is irascible—an old man with the gripe who has to work hard all day when he should be sitting in bed with a steaming toddy in his hand. Executives quarrel with their secretaries, who thereupon weep and quit their jobs. Husbands snap at their wives at the breakfast table. Subway guards, in top form, crush a hundred snorting passengers into a space that ordinarily wouldn't be fit for fifty pickled herring.

Then, one day, a glowering editor looks up from his desk at a man who stands before him. The editor's scowl fades. He smiles for the first time since Christmas. He hops up and eagerly extends a hand to this gray-haired gentleman with a gray mustache, who wears a black and white plaid overcoat and carries a snakewood cane with a big silver knob at the top, and who laughs infectiously and says, "Hello, Jack. You're looking great!"

"By golly!" the editor cries. "It's Dexter!"

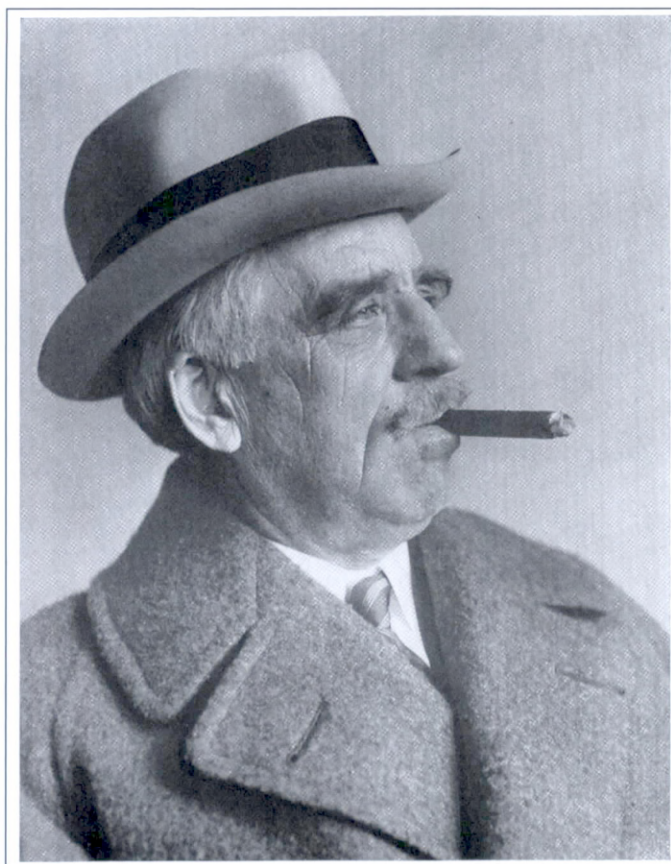
Spring has come to New York City. Dexter Fellows, press agent for the circus, is in town!

The word flashes through the office—"Dexter Fellows is here!" Reporters, editors, office boys come on the run.

"Hi, Dexter, how's the brass-boned behemoth of Holy Writ?" one cries.

"Hello Bill!" Dexter Fellows wrings their hands. He's tickled to death to see them. "Hello, Henry! How're the kids? Hi, Jim, did you ever finish that novel?" He calls them all by name, every one.

Outside, it may be hailing and blowing but in the newspaper offices it is spring, sweet spring that the poets press-



*Dexter W. Fellows, a portrait by Robert H. Davis*

agent so effectively, with gentle breezes and laughter and crocuses—and circuses.

Overnight, Father Knickerbocker perks up. There's a different tone in the newspapers. Even the police reporters become jovial about the crime wave, and the Democratic editorial writers look with tolerance upon what was yesterday a frightful state of affairs in Washington.

On the subway, men look up from their newspapers and exclaim to perfect strangers, "The circus is coming!" The perfect strangers smile back and say, "Yep. I guess the winter is over!" and in cold, unfriendly New York, where one often hasn't even a nodding acquaintance with a person who has been his next-door neighbor for five years, they chatter as congenially as if they were fellow Kansans at a picnic in Pasadena.

Of course, now and then, these perfect strangers turn out to be insurance salesmen somewhat less than perfect, but such unfortunate occurrences are rare.

As Dexter Fellows is the forerunner of spring in New York City—three hops ahead of the first robin—so is he the herald of prosperity through the remainder of the country. The circus plays no dead towns. It stays far from the footprints of the Four Horsemen. Government reports may indicate that the success of the wheat crop is in doubt, but when Dexter Fellows lands in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the summer and says, "The circus is coming," the merchants and bankers





*Lillian Leitzel and Alfredo Codona, 1928*

are as delighted as the kids, for they know that the circus has decided that the wheat crop is O.K. and the farmers will be able to liquidate.

The circus avoids the South if cotton doesn't look so good. When the boll weevil seems to become more robust every day, quick shifts in the schedule are made, for even though the general admission to the Big Top is only seventy-five cents, discouraged farmers will not contribute to make up the sixteen thousand dollars that the circus must take in every day in order to pay the overhead and buy hay for the zebras. So the arrival of Dexter Fellows in Waco, Texas, is a surer sign of prosperity than a hundred optimistic reports from the Department of Agriculture. You'd no more scowl at Dexter Fellows than at a horseshoe you found lying in the road.

As an army travels on its stomach, so does the circus travel on its newspaper publicity. Red, green, and yellow posters are important. Newspaper advertising is imperative. But the posters and the advertising cannot convey to the people the gayety and the thrills and the spirit of carnival that they experience when a good reporter goes out and interviews the snake charmer and gives them the story, or when he transmits Dexter Fellows' solemn and straightforward account of how Dr. Saw Po Min, owner of the Sacred White Elephant, turned Baptist and no longer would allow the faithful Mohammedans—or perhaps they were Buddhists—to visit the circus and throw themselves prostrate before the venerable beast.

The good doctor, it seemed, in religious fervor, would prod the heathen with an elephant hook, thus disturbing

their worshipful attitude, and while chasing them out of the animal tent he would preach a vigorous sermon in his native tongue, lapsing into English only when referring to what he expected to happen when they ended their good-for-nothing lives. The good doctor's deplorable attitude had caused a great deal of ill feeling in San Francisco—or it may have been in Butte, Montana—and Mr. Fellows begged the newspapers to warn all Mohammedans (or Buddhists) to remain standing while viewing the Sacred White Elephant, or else to wear in the seats of their trousers some stout substance that could not readily be perforated by an elephant hook.

The theater, the movies, the radio, and a hundred other industries and amusements have looked upon the publicity accomplishments of P.T. Barnum with envy and have set about to adopt and to refine his methods. They have developed expensive and high-powered Counselors of Public Relations and Directors of Publicity who attempt with more or less suc-

cess to get pieces in the paper. By fair means and foul—now and then by deliberate hoaxes—they have persuaded the newspapers to relate the opinions of Suzie Sneez regarding short skirts or have crashed the rotogravure sections with photographs of Mr. Hiram K. Hocous, President of the Hocous Supply Corporation, demonstrating, by means of a cutie in a one-piece bathing suit, the advantages of his latest invention, the vertical bathtub.

These Counselors and Directors have sniffed at the term "press agent." They have sneered at "circus stuff," as they sat behind their mahogany desks and by means of charts and tests figured out ways to get their items into type. They have made commendable progress. Much that they write is welcomed by editors. Their ethics are improving.

Surrounded by huge staffs with stamping and mimeographing machines galloping furiously in a back room, daily they send thousands of carefully selected words to the newspapers. They check and re-check. They keep scrapbooks, they make surveys and reports, and when the clipping bureau turns in a three-inch item about the vertical bathtub from the Warrenton, Kansas, *Daily Journal-World*, there is great rejoicing.

But what was good enough for Barnum is good enough for Ringling. The show is essentially the same. The methods for getting things into the papers are unchanged. The circus is the most popular single amusement enterprise we have and its publicity practices are the most successful. And the greatest of all press agents operating today is "Dexter W. Fellows of The Circus."

In introducing himself, he never mentions what circus.



To him there is only one.

"If you were in London," he says, "singing 'God Save the King,' would you think it was necessary to stop and explain what king?"

Without surveys or machines, his office in his hat, he walks into a newspaper office with a bundle of photographs under his arm, as welcome as a star reporter with a scoop. The editor shoves to the floor eighty-seven envelopes from Public Relations Counselors, each marked "News! Rush!" and shouts, "Well, if it isn't Dexter Fellows! Sit Down!"

Like a ragged kid with a string, nine worms, and a bent pin, he catches all the big trout in the stream while the fellow with the split bamboo rod and the twelve-dollar flies can't get even a bite.

Editorial associations have adopted bitter resolutions against circus publicity, and have sworn to high heaven that never again would they open their columns to truck about what the sea elephant ate for a midnight lunch.

Then along comes Dexter fellows, smiling blandly, with his "Hello, Walt! How're the folks?" and the next morning there it all is in the paper, about how the fire eater fell in love with the bearded lady and how, when she broke the engagement, he pleaded for just one more kiss. And then how she said, "Oh, very well," rather pleased by the sentiment thus displayed, not knowing that the scoundrel had his mouth full of fire when he deliberately breathed upon her and burned off all her whiskers, so wreaking a terrible revenge.

Truth in publicity, say the Counselors of Public Relations, is a very important thing. Dexter Fellows agrees. He never has lied to a newspaper-man—that is, hardly ever. At least, not without a perceptible twinkle in his eye.

For thirty-seven years he has been calling upon newspaper-men in the United States, in Canada, and for one season in England. That one season in England is not to be lightly passed over. That was the year when, representing Buffalo Bill's Wild West, he approached the English editors wearing a high silk hat, a frock coat, a Vandyke beard, and a gold-headed cane. They were like clay in his hands.

In his thirty-seven years of press agency he has inspired kind words about Pawnee Bill, Buffalo Bill, the Barnum and Bailey Show, and now Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Combined, known just as "The Circus." Mr. Fellows gives his solemn oath that there are no adjectives in the English language fit to describe adequately its Gargantuan splendor nor its Titanic magnificence, which, for the small sum of seventy-five cents, will amaze, bewilder, dazzle, astound, and completely flabbergast the fortunate beholder.

He is fifty-eight years old and, splendid though his memory is, he can hardly remember when he hasn't been on the jump—except in the wintertime. He has no idea how many hundreds of thousands of miles he has traveled. If there is a town in the United States or Canada that he has not visited, there is something the matter with that town. He



*Felix Adler and showgirls, 1933*

knows more newspaper men than any other living person—knows them well, by their first names.

Last Christmas he sent seven hundred and fifty Christmas cards to newspaper-men, and he wrote every name and address from memory. He carries no notebook filled with names and addresses and information as to the children and wives and hobbies of newspaper-men—no ready reference to be consulted before the sales approach. Dexter Fellows has it all in his head.

"Whom do you know, for instance," I tested him, "in Milwaukee?"

"Well, let's see. Milwaukee. That's a good circus town. But the lot's a terrible haul from the railroad yards—out to the Fair Grounds must be five miles. It's hard on the horses. Let's see—Milwaukee. Take *The Journal*, there's Marvin Creager—Marvin H. Creager—he used to be in Kansas City on *The Star*—Murray Reed, Bob Green—no e on the end of Green, and Reed is spelled with a double e, not R-e-a-d—and Mr. Dart, the publisher, and Mr. Moffett. And over on *The Sentinel* are Judge Backus and George Lounsbury and Julius Liebmann and Fredenburg.

"Some of these fellows, their first name eludes me. I'd get it though, if I gave it a little thought. There's Mr. Price in the Sunday Department and Ed Hart on the city desk. On *The News* there's E. H. Kronsage and Jack Robert and Curley—son of Bill Curley of New York—and Herman Ewald





*The Loyal Repenski Troupe, 1933*

and Peggy Patton. Peggy's married now. She's a dear.

"On *The Leader*—poor Victor Berger's dead. What's the name of that Irishman that came from Boston?—Oh, yes, Haggerty. And Wolfsohn. And—let's see—it's hard to remember names when you're so far away. If I walked into the office and saw the fellows I could tell them all."

"Do you use any memory system?" I asked, more astounded than by anything I had ever seen in the circus. These were people whom he visited for an hour or two only once a year—in one town out of one hundred and fifty.

"System?" He was surprised. "Ha! You don't need a system to remember people you like."

Dexter Fellows' career is the triumph of a friendly man. He likes everybody. It is no pose, adopted for business expediency. He's on the level.

I talked with him in his "winter quarters," an apartment in Hartford, Connecticut, where he and Mrs. Fellows rest and relax from November until March. Here they eat real New England cooking and sleep in soft beds, and try to forget hotels and restaurants and sleeping cars.

"You must be glad to settle down for a while," I said.

"It's great. Real food," he exclaimed. "A place to hang up your clothes."

Mrs. Fellows laughed. "But in another month," she said, "he'll be pacing up and down, wanting to get started again, like a kid waiting for Christmas."

"I feel better," he smiled, "when I'm with the circus. Anybody does," he added. "I like to get out and around and see the newspaper boys—all the fellows I've known for years."

Newspaper-men say that Dexter Fellows hasn't an enemy in the world. I asked him about that.

"I don't like to admit it," he said solemnly. "A man ought to have a few enemies, hadn't he? But I don't know that I have."

"Isn't there anybody you hate?"

He shook his head. Then, "Oh, yes!" he corrected. "Sure." He was intensely serious. "The boys that sell box lunches at the trains down South! I haven't any use for them any more. Until a few years ago you could buy a box lunch for fifty or seventy-five cents, and you'd get the grandest fried chicken. But now! They've turned crooked. They give you tough old hens."

That was the only hate he could remember.

"Wasn't there ever an editor who knocked the circus—some fellow who didn't treat you right? Haven't you a hate or two like that?"

He shook his head. "Nobody ever knocked the circus," he answered firmly. "Almost—once, though," he brightened. "In New York last spring I got a letter on the letterhead of a big feature syndicate. A fellow asked for tickets. On the letterhead was the name of a man I had known out in Wichita twenty years ago. When I sent the tickets, I told the fellow who had written the letter to give my regards to my old friend in Wichita."

"Two days later the former Wichita man wrote me. He said that it was his office boy who had written for the tickets, and the boy gave him my message."

"I was just composing an article for two hundred newspapers that I intended to be the first knock ever registered against the circus," the syndicate man wrote. "I went to see your show and I thought it had lost the sparkle and dash of former years, and I was going to say so. Then my office boy came bounding in to tell me that he had seen the circus on tickets that you sent him. He was wide-eyed and breathless as he described what he had seen, and as he described those acts that I had thought dull and conventional, I saw them again through the eyes of a kid, and I became breathless, too. I realized that the circus, after all, was all right. It was I who had slipped. So the first knock that ever was written about the circus went into the wastebasket. Come in and see me some time, Dexter, and tell me about the lions and the elephants and the fat girl."

Because Dexter Fellows sent two tickets to an office boy, there is still no mud on the bright escutcheon of the circus.

Dexter Fellows writes but little about the circus. He lets the newspaper reporters do the writing. His work is to furnish ideas, to help the reporters gather their material, and to see that they have plenty of photographs.

In all fairness to the Public Relations Counselors who



are less successful with their clients than Dexter Fellows, it should be pointed out that the circus is a "natural" for the newspapers. It comes but once a year. It is jammed full of interesting people and amazing animals, and it lends itself readily to high jinks in the newspaper columns.

A press agent for a circus has a cinch, the Public Relations Counselors say.

Perhaps it is true. Perhaps there are more brilliant performers in press agency than Dexter Fellows. The circus itself has four or five other men. But Dexter Fellows is the spirit of the circus, according to the rating of his clients, the newspaper-men.

He is probably the only living man who can carry a silver-headed snakewood cane in Hawksville, Oklahoma, for instance, and not be shot at. As to the reception that might be accorded the black and white plaid overcoat, no facts are obtainable, since Mr. Fellows visits Oklahoma in late summer and has never given Hawksville an opportunity to make up its mind about that garment.

Dexter Fellows is not of Broadway. He doesn't say "sixty grand" when he means "sixty thousand dollars." He speaks not of "mugs" nor does he say an act "laid an egg" when he means that it was unsuccessful. He is of, by, and for the circus, and the circus is no more Broadway than an ear of corn or a whiffletree. Upon first sight you would judge him to be a prosperous mid-Western banker, who carries a cane because it was a present from the Chamber of Commerce and whose taste in overcoats denotes nothing more sinister than effort to contradict the testimony of gray hair that old age is in the offing.

In speech and demeanor he is conservative. When he is bemoaning the fact that seventy-five dollars' worth of monkeys in a cage will attract more attention than twenty-five



*Ella Bradna, 1930*

thousand dollars' worth of giraffes, you might mistake him for a professor of philosophy. As he describes the tragic life and death of John Daniel II, the gorilla, he might be a scientist who spent his life lecturing with colored slides in high school auditoriums.

Only when he reaches the subject of John Ringling, does he expand. When he really gets going upon this, his favorite subject, you wonder whether you caught the name correctly. He must, you feel, be talking about Abraham Lincoln.

When he tires of the circus—which will be never—Dexter Fellows says he is going to retire to a little farm in Connecticut, and sit out in the shade and whittle a stick and look at the trees. He likes trees. While you are walking with him, he will stop and point out a beautiful tree with as much enthusiasm as if it were Lillian Leitzel. Sometimes he goes out and talks to trees. It clears his mind and rests him.

"That's about the only nutty thing I do," he says; "talk to trees. You ought to try it. You've no idea how many things you can get off your mind."

Dexter Fellows has been quoted on nearly every subject in the world. Because he is such a nice person, newspapermen are forever writing pieces about him; and because he is always willing to say anything they suggest—it's all for the good of the circus—they quote him ad lib, on any subject that happens to enter their minds.

This probably is the only article ever written about him in which the writer has refrained from getting Dexter Fellows to go into lengthy discussions of subjects regarding which he has no ideas whatsoever.

"I've been quoted," he told me, as saying I was personal friend of P.T. Barnum, and they have had me telling about how I played chuck-a-luck with Adam Forepaugh. That made me out as being about eighty-five years old! When I



*Peggy Murray, 1932*





*The Garland Entry performers, 1930*

was five years old I crawled under a side wall in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and saw P.T. Barnum driving round the ring. That's the closest I ever came to Barnum.

"One day I am quoted as naming the African elephant as my favorite beast, and the next I have to say that I believe there's nothing better for a house pet than a good hyena. Out in Iowa, once, in three days, hand-running, in three different towns, I was said to have recommended each of these towns as being the ideal spot for holding the State Dentists' Convention.

"If you got together all the clippings of things the reporters have made me say, you'd exclaim, 'Gee whiz! Here's a bloke that certainly can't make up his mind!'"

He laughed. "But who cares—as long as they mention the circus?"

Fellows got his first taste of the enviable life of an exponent of dramatic art in Fitchburg when, as a boy, he played the part of a whisky bottle in the parade of Clark's stupendous production of that great moral lesson, "Ten Nights in a Barroom." Dexter, inside the papier-mâché bottle, marched down Main Street and was so thrilled by the favorable comment which his performance inspired that he decided then and there to go in for the drama.

His next public appearance was as the leader of a bloodhound in an Uncle Tom's Cabin parade. He wore proudly a red coat with gold braid on it and glanced neither to right nor to left as he strode behind the band. After the parade, Dexter asked the bloodhound man whether everything had gone all right.

"I tell you, son, to tell the truth," said the bloodhound man, handing Dexter the two tickets to the show which paid

for his labor, "for thirty year, man or boy, I hain't seen a bloodhound led better."

This was indeed high praise. Dexter knew then that he had made no mistake in choosing the drama as his life work.

But the circus came to town! He would join the circus, become rich and famous!

He pored over the *New York Clipper*, looking for opportunities, and one day the Big Chance came. An advertisement said the Pawnee Bill show wanted men "to work on the program." Dexter didn't know what that meant, but he wrote, saying that he was one of the best program workers in the world. No other living man, he said, could even approach, when working on a program, the grace, the finesse, the magnificent imperturbability of Dexter Fellows.

So impressed with the letter was Pawnee Bill that he sent immediately for its author; and when Dexter Fellows joined the show at Hagerstown, Maryland, he found that his salary was

to be twenty dollars a week and that he had been made press agent. If a man could say those things about himself, there was no limit to what he could think up about Pawnee Bill!

"I was darn lucky," said Dexter Fellows. "It was a good show—real cowboys and a bunch of real Arabs, and the newspapers found a lot to write about. In Rochester, it happened, Charles O'Connor, editor of *The Post-Express*, was all upset because Grover Cleveland had been talking about putting civilians in charge of Indian posts. O'Connor wanted army officers as Indian agents.

"He interviewed Pawnee Bill and found that he agreed, and O'Connor wrote a long editorial about what an amazing genius Bill was. I got all the credit for it, and Bill thought I was a great fellow. I was set for life with him.

"In 1894 I left Pawnee Bill and the next year joined the Buffalo Bill show. I was with Buffalo Bill for ten or eleven years, had a year with Ringling Brothers, then went with Barnum & Bailey. Then came the combination, and John Ringling—" he stopped. "Say!" he exclaimed. "Nobody gives a darn about how I got into the circus business and what I have done. Why don't you write a story about John Ringling? Let me tell you about John Ringling. He's the smartest, the finest, the best-hearted man that ever—"

Half an hour later we got back to the subject in hand.

Dexter Fellows is an encyclopedia of the circus. Open any page and you find interesting facts.

"The circus hasn't changed much since Barnum's day," he said. It's bigger and better, of course. But the appeal is the same. The main difference is in the way they treat their customers. John Ringling is responsible for that. The Ringling Brothers always were that way. In the old days the Ringling



outfit was called 'a Sunday school show' by the hard-boiled guys that didn't belong to it.

"There's no gypping, no confidence games, no short changing, and you see in the tent just what the advertisements promise.

"You don't see, these days, so many dare-devil acts, like the loop-the-loop on a bicycle and such. When they sign an act now they make sure that it can play out the season. You advertise a loop-the-loop, and then the fellow falls and breaks a leg; then when you get to the next town, there's a terrible squawk from the customers. They won't believe you ever had such an act.

"It was that way with John Daniel II, the only gorilla in captivity. He was always getting sick and couldn't be taken from his car, and every time he didn't appear, as advertised, it gave the show a black eye."

In only one department, he believes, is the circus slipping. That is in the riding. You don't get riders like Jim Robinson, May Wirth, Charley Fish, and William Showles, the Apollo Belvedere of the ring. The reason is that good riders must ride from childhood, and the laws these days won't permit children to perform in a circus. So the sons and daughters of great riders lose interest when all their riding must be done out behind the Big Top, and they go away and become movie actors or bond salesmen.

But in other departments the circus is far better. Take the aerial artists, for instance. Alfredo Codona, husband of Lillian Leitzel, is the only man ever to do a triple somersault from a flying trapeze twice daily. Others try it, and hit the catcher's hands accurately once or twice a week. But Codona completes the triple somersault every single time.

"What puts an act over?" I asked him. He had been discussing certain performers who did tricks better than anybody else, but who never received the applause that was given acts that technically were inferior.

"Style," he answered promptly. "Timing. Grace. It. They have it in the circus just as in the movies. The man or woman who performs effortlessly some rather simple stunt will go over bigger than grunting acrobats who do miracles. You find more style now. They're getting away from the old routine bows and poses, and they act like real people. They dress better. And the girls are prettier."

The movies are not hurting the circus.

"As long as there are children," he said, "there will be a circus. It's too bad the kids of today can't see the old-time parades. But the parades had to go. Many cities prohibited them by ordinance. They jammed up traffic. It was hard on the horses, too. Towns are building up so fast that circus lots are getting farther and farther from the railroad; and by the time the horses made several hauls to the lot, covered the



*Jack Earl, 1936*

main part of town with the parade, and then made more hauls back after the show, they had taken more punishment than we wanted them to stand.

"Often, too, we couldn't deliver when we promised a parade. Our trains would be late, or we'd get bogged down in mud, or we'd have a breakdown, and thousands of people who had stood along the line of march for hours would be mad when we had to announce that the parade was called off. They never would understand that we tried and failed. They believe that a circus can do anything, and when you slip up on something, they think you are deliberately buncoing them.

"Tractor salesmen, for years," said Fellows, "have tried to make sales to the circus, but the circus still runs almost entirely on horse- and elephant-power.

"We've had six tractors, but they won't work in deep sand or in heavy mud. Take the hippo wagon or a pole wagon with the heavy center pole, or a canvas wagon carrying canvas that has been in the rain all day. I've seen times when you had to use thirty-six horses to haul it—twelve ahead, twelve on each side, and two elephants pushing behind. Tractors couldn't budge wagons like that.

"The city in which the freaks have the greatest pull is New York. The most noted freak was Zip, who died recently at an unknown age—probably more than eighty years. P.T. Barnum found him in Bound Brook, New Jersey, and first exhibited him at his museum in New York City. Charles Dickens is said to have inspired the name 'The What Is It.' Dickens visited the museum, and looked upon Zip and said to Barnum, 'What is it?' And Barnum answered, 'That's just what it is.' And, for sixty or seventy years, it was.

"There are no more bearded ladies. They can't be found





*Concello Troupe, 1932*

anymore. The Baroness De Barcy, a Hungarian, was the last we had and she left the show six years ago."

To Dexter Fellows, life has been one lucky break after another. He envies no man. He has found true happiness in his job. He would rather be a press agent for the circus than a billionaire. What could be better than a job that takes you around the country meeting, day after day, old friends that you haven't seen for a year?

In only one incident have his friends, the newspapermen, been a keen disappointment. They have thwarted one of his life's ambitions—to get into print a certain story. It's a great story, he firmly believes. But nobody will print it.

"You never can tell about newspaper men," he said. "Sometimes you get an idea that to you doesn't seem to be so hot, and they plaster the story all over the front page. Again, you get a marvelous idea, and they pooh-pooh it."

"For instance," I said.

"Three years ago, I got a hunch for a story—one of the greatest stories. Oh, boy, what a story! But—would you believe it?—not a soul will print it. Once it got into type at *The New York Times*, but somebody saw the proof and killed it. It's the ambition of my life to get that story printed. But every time I tell it to a newspaper-man he laughs at me."

"What's the yarn?"

"Here it is," he said determinedly. "John Ringling, down at winter quarters in Sarasota, Florida, is trying to cross

parrots with carrier pigeons." He paused, waiting for applause, or something.

"Uh, huh," I said, without enthusiasm. "Go on."

"Darn it!" he complained. That's the way they all act. Don't you see the point? Carrier pigeons and parrots—so the birds will be able to deliver messages in person. It'll be a great industry. The Western Union is fighting it tooth and toe-nail. It'll practically ruin the telegraph business. The air will be full of these, these er—what'll we call 'em—car—let's see." He scratched his head. "What's a good combination of the words carrier pigeon and parrot?"

"Car-rot," I suggested.

"No. That would hardly do. Pigerot! That's it. The air will be full of pigerots, from John Ringling's pigerot farm, carrying messages. You'll just go down to the pigerot office and say you want to send a message to George Longan on *The Kansas City Star*. The pigerot manager

will pick out a Kansas City pigerot, you'll tell it your message, and, whiff! off he'll fly to deliver your very words! How's that?"

"Yeah?" I said.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed, all discouraged. "I thought sure a smart fellow like you would see that there's one of the biggest stories ever conceived. Listen," he begged. "I've been trying to get that story into print for three years. Don't you think you could use it somewhere? Come on. Help me out. Go ahead and write it, even if you put it clear down at the end where they can take it or leave it."

You can't resist Dexter Fellows. There's the story about the pigerots. Clear down at the end. Take it or leave it. **BW**



*Ringling Main Entrance tent, 1931*



# Gazing in the Big Cage

## Part I: Lions, Tigers and Trainers

by Ken Kawata

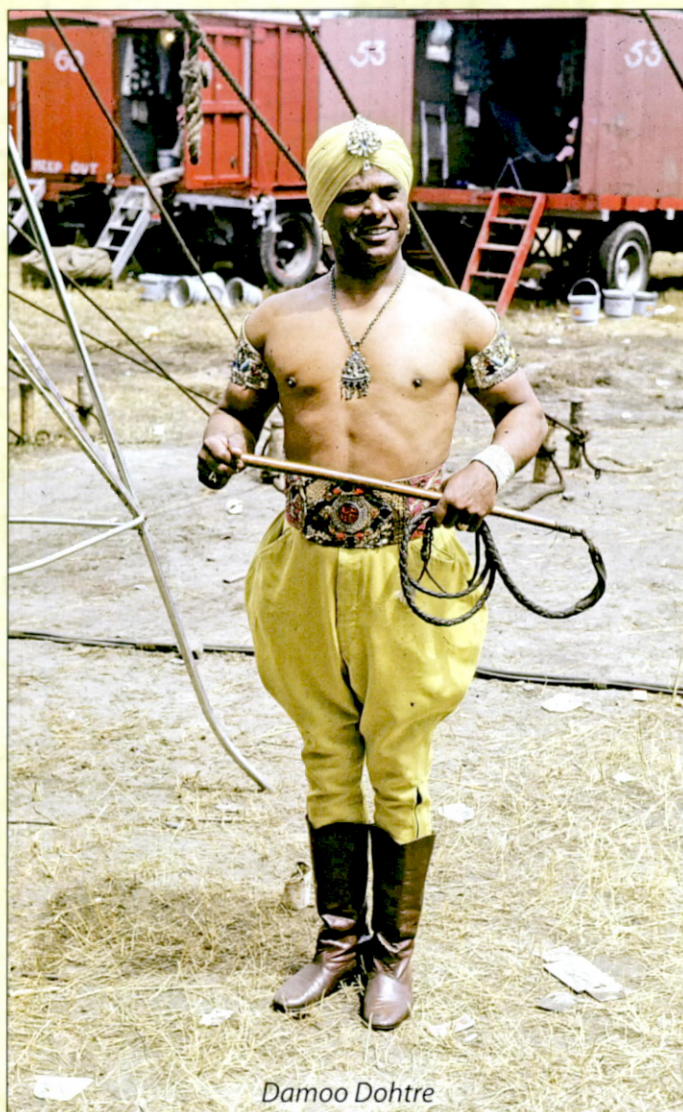
Photos used with permission from Illinois State University's Special Collections, Milner Library.

Of all the popular mammals in circuses and zoos, no other carnivores radiate more raw magnetism than lions and tigers. They do not have to flex their broad shoulders to convey dangerous masculinity. They move with grace and stealth; their cunning gaze suggests beasts taking the measure of the prey. That inscrutability adds mystery, and circus trainers and these big cats provide a fascinating subject.

I spent most of my active work years as a mid-level zoo administrator in charge of animal care personnel and animal collections. Because of my background, my research often leans toward animal husbandry. The following account does not represent a thorough examination of the subject, nor does it intend to be a "how to" text of training. This is a vast area of study, and based on books by authors from several countries I will review selected topics. For instance, attacks and injuries by cats attract a great deal of attention, but they will respectfully be left in the hand of other authors. The time period covered by this article ranges from the late nineteenth century through the 1970s.

### The Trainer and the Trained Patience and Courage

"How does a man come to be a wild animal trainer? [while there must be better ways to make a living]," Austrian born Roman Proske asked himself. Proske continued: "...there may be an actual chemical need, in some people, for the drug we call danger, the sensation of fear. I know in my own case that after moments of the greatest danger—when moments seemed hours and fear possessed me utterly—I have always felt delightfully refreshed. On the other hand when I retired from the steel arena after forty years of unceasing activity, and the shock of fear and danger was re-



Damoo Dohre





moved, I suffered as cruelly physically and mentally as any confirmed drug addict deprived of his narcotic. But all these are afterthoughts. I became a wild animal trainer when I was still a boy because I loved animals and I knew of no better way to be with them.”<sup>1</sup>

Along the same line as “chemistry,” renowned French circus owner and trainer Alfred Court even noted: “Circus people are driven by a demon. I was just over fifty when, my health restored, I took to the road again in 1934.”<sup>2</sup> Also Alex Kerr, trainer for the 1950s Bertram Mills Circus, observed: “Working with wild animals, however much you love it, must be a constant nerve strain, keeping on your toes, finding reasons for their behaviour and staying one jump ahead of them.”

Time and again, the greatest animal trainers acknowledged the need for certain personality traits for their line of work. It is not surprising to learn that courage is essential, but a successful trainer must also display great patience, self-control, and confidence. As presented here, the words of many recognized trainers echo time and again and create a picture of the type of person who can truly bond with the animals in their care.

Court described certain mental and physical qualities a trainer must have, as follows:

“You need a little courage, but not bravado. Courage enough to face up to an angry animal and call his bluff must be combined with intelligence and humility, with a knowledge of your own limitations, and with the quickness to perceive when your own bluff is about to be called. And with all that, you need the tactics of withdrawal without losing face in the animal’s eyes, for he must never know that he has gotten the better of you. You need patience and physical endurance and complete control over yourself, your voice, and every





Harriett and Clyde Beatty



muscle of your body. For your patience and your body may be strained until you are ready to drop and cry out with fatigue, yet all your movements and your voice must remain gentle, flowing and persuasive.

"The easy, soft affection you give a pet dog is not enough for wild animals. You need the deep love for them that comes from a complete understanding of their very different traits. And, most important of all, you need to be able to submerge your personality and approach them on the level of their own mentality. You must remember that they live in communities where their every action is governed by their bodily needs: the urges to hunt for food, to secure warmth and shelter, and to mate. The fact that their reasoning power is limited means that they do not bargain with one another for their necessities—they fight. And if a

man wants to be considered one of them, he must observe their code as they do. To them, a man appears as another animal, and they expect the same respect for their rights from him as from one of their own kind. A man must accept the fact that in their eyes he will often be a challenger of their rights."<sup>3</sup>

Also a quote, from the Russian trainer Boris Eder: "The study of an animal's nature takes months and years, and still the trainer cannot ever be sure that he has come to know every trait of the animal's character." He adds: "The trainer must never let an animal know that it has wounded him or, in other words, let it know what it can do to him."<sup>4</sup> And here follows a recollection by the well-known Gunther Gebel-Williams regarding self-discipline: "I had to be alert every minute of every day. I could never let my guard down because I did not feel well or I was tired or out of sorts. And when I was performing, I always had to be in tip-top physi-





*Dolly and Terrell Jacobs*

cal condition, regardless of how many shows I had done or how long I had been performing. Over the years I have also had to be patient with myself and be very flexible.”<sup>5</sup>

To cite Roman Proske again: “No man with an uncontrollable temper, no man without inexhaustible patience—in short, no man who is not master of himself—can hope to master wild animals.”<sup>6</sup> Echoing this, Damoo Dhotre, arguably India’s greatest trainer, noted: “There are a thousand and one ways for a person to make a living. Training wild animals is an occupation one chooses when he has nerves of iron, muscle of steel, and boundless courage.”<sup>7</sup> On this subject Frank Bostock, the acclaimed British animal impresario, offered a bit of wisdom, redefining courage:

“An animal trainer is a complex and unique person in more ways than one. He is not always superlatively endowed with the characteristics that are attributed to him by most casual observers. Curiously enough, the very element that would seem the most essential is scarcely ever reckoned as

his chief virtue. Courage is considered by those who know little about it as one of the first requisites, but a man may have physical and moral courage to an unusual degree and still be quite unfit for a trainer. The animal trainer may have, and all do have to some extent, the physical courage which is admired, but it is an unconscious courage, and plays such a minor part in a successful performance, that the possession of it is not noted, either by the trainer himself, or by those who know him. There are faculties far higher and far more difficult to cultivation, as well as more rarely possessed, which the animal trainer must have.”<sup>8</sup>

“Another quality is nerve—and plenty of it. Without nerve no man can do anything with a wild animal; it is the secret of the animal trainer’s success, while ceaseless vigilance means the safety of his life. I have known trainers who would start at the slightest noise of a sudden sound, and who would rather walk ten miles out of their way than meet a stranger, or attract attention in any way; and yet in times of danger, when their lives hung in the balance, would exhibit the utmost nerve and daring, mixed with a calm appearance that was astonishing.” On the next page, he brings up a quality “which is even more essential than any of the others.” “This is a knowledge of animal nature, as diversified and peculiar, and as subject to varying conditions and environment, as human nature. Some may say that it is not as highly organized, but it furnishes the same food for thought,



*Dick Clemens*





with the added element that upon the trainer's knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of his charges depends his successes, and very often his life."<sup>9</sup>

It takes quite a while to reach such a point to reflect upon their work for many trainers, since they start this line of work early in life. Back in India, at a tender age of nine,



Damoo Dhotre joined his uncle's circus and became a professional acrobat before he took up on animal training.<sup>10</sup> Against his father's wishes Frank Bostock became "The Boy Trainer" at fifteen.<sup>11</sup> Also at the age of fifteen, Clyde Beatty "unceremoniously" left home to join the circus.<sup>12</sup> Alex Kerr was seventeen when he was hired by a zoo, first assigned at its pet shop.<sup>13</sup> They entered circus life which, by its very nature, is in a constant state of change. Also, as noted by Gebel-Williams: "Circus life is stressful for the person running the operation. You go from one town to the next and do the same things over and over again and hope that business is good. You even have to be involved in the publicity."<sup>14</sup>

Beneath the surface of blinding spotlights lies human emotion, for, dealing with mammals such as large felids inevitably develops personal attachment to individual animals. Underneath the skin of machismo often sits a sensitive soul. Such words as love and kindness abound in books authored by trainers. Natural life span of their subjects, however, is much shorter than that of a human. In particular, circus life is riddled with hazards, and separations and departures are common, all too soon and often.

Damoo Dhotre's recollections: "I have watched many animals die, always with great sorrow and a sense of personal loss. But I had never before been quite so crushed" as when he stood one night watching Doushka, a snow leopard, breathe her last in New York's Madison Square Garden in 1940. Doushka was Alfred Court's most prized animal. She was the only performing member of that species in the world. She was attacked by a common leopard and that was when Dhotre heard "the most unearthly sound I have ever listened to."<sup>15</sup> A medical doctor, Court, and Dhotre made a gallant effort to save her, in vain.

Court himself was philosophical about a trainer's life: "Although I love animals as much as any man, and although I have several times in my life wept for grief at the death of one of my cats, I have never gone about my work in a suicidal frame of mind. On the rare occasions when I have had to fight for my life, I have always thought that if one of us had to be killed, it had better not be the trainer."<sup>16</sup> Regardless, loss of an animal is difficult to take, as recalled by Gebel-Williams: "During my first couple of years with Circus Williams, I felt terrible whenever an animal died, and I would cry and be upset for days. Later I became a little harder and tougher because I realized that everyone must die sometime, but I still could never casually face the loss of an animal as others did."<sup>17</sup>

Continuing on human emotions, danger is a part of a trainer's life and that raises the question: "How many times in the course of my career I have been asked: Aren't you ever afraid?" Roman Proske reminded himself. "I have always tried to answer truthfully: Yes, many times. More times than I can remember. Nobody is more afraid of wild animals than a wild animal trainer. He knows only too well



*Alfred Court*

what they can do to him with their unpredictable nature, their terrible strength and power."<sup>18</sup> Just as a contrast, here follows a remark by Mabel Stark, America's most famous female wild animal trainer, to wit:





Alfred Court

"Mine may seem a strange profession for a woman, but it is not physical strength that counts in the big cage. The important things are courage and patience, nimble feet, and nimble wits. For me there is no greater thrill than stepping into a cageful of those glorious beasts and matching wits with them. Every turn of their sleek heads, every glance of their keen eyes telegraph, 'We're just waiting our chance. We'll get you yet! You have the whip hand now, but one of these days you'll get careless. There will be mud an inch deep on the ground, and you will slip on that treacherous straw. Or you'll be worrying because the band music is too loud or too slow, or wondering if that new cage man can be trusted. Then look out! One spring, a few blows with red-denied claws, and it will be over.' I am not afraid. I like the challenge of their roaring defiances. I like facing them with just a buggy whip—or a stick—and a revolver with blank cartridges. I know that my will is stronger than their muscles. By the tone of my voice I can make them cringe with fear or purr with pleasure."<sup>19</sup>

Certainly her view does not diminish Proske's honesty, nor does his discredit Stark's steely demeanor. Trainers are by no means a monolithic bunch. Perhaps, Bostock's refreshing, all-too-human comment will put this in perspective: "There are hundreds of occupations, such as mining, building, tunneling, and driving railway engines, where men also run daily risks, and an animal trainer runs no more than any of these, provided he is careful and cautious. Animal trainers are no different from other men. They all have the

same capacity for fear that every man has in time of great danger, but they have schooled themselves, by good habits and self-control, to meet the danger calmly."<sup>20</sup>

### Furred and Clawed Pupils

The name Mabel Stark is closely connected with tigers. However she trained a variety of animals in her lifetime, including a large male black jaguar, one tough cookie. She had this to say: "Lions become less dangerous after they have been broken and worked a while; so do leopards and pumas. But not the tigers. As they lose their innate fear of man through close association with him, they become increasingly bold. One second off guard has cost many trainers their lives."<sup>21</sup>

Lions and tigers are closely related to each other. In fact, after a carcass is skinned you would have a hard time identifying the species right away. Yet the two are so different, the point which has been brought up not only by Stark, but also by others such as tidbits by Clyde Beatty:

"Lions, in contrast to tigers, always 'gang up,' even in debate. If one lion decides to indulge in a little oral abuse of the trainer, most of the relatives and neighbors take up the tune." In a mixed species show, "Lions always 'gang up' in a fight, and this is doubly true of brothers. Tigers, on the other hand, fight alone." "Full-grown lions are sometimes as playful as cubs," he thus pointed up their curiosity. One day during the show, someone accidentally pulled the wrong switch and electric lights began to pop all over the arena. "The reaction of the animals was a good example of the difference between lions and tigers. The lions, with typical curiosity, kept looking up as the bits and pieces of the shattered bulbs fell to the arena floor. Astonishment was written all over their faces as they took turns at giving me a sort of what's-*this*-all-about look. The tigers, on the other hand, were merely fretful. As the bulbs kept popping they moved about nervously on their pedestals, but their curiosity seemed blunted and they seldom looked up for a good view of the spectacle that the lions found so absorbing, the exploding of the lights one by one."<sup>22</sup>

German-born Charly Baumann, for many years a star on the Ringling Circus, comparing the two species, noted that "changing from lions to tigers was like going from drums to a violin. While my lions were heavy, requiring sharp, deliberate movements, the tigers were light, requiring delicate, smooth movements. My habits, formed in a half-dozen years of working with lions, had to be broken before I could perform in the style required by the new animals."<sup>23</sup>

When it comes to the male lion Baumann was least flattering, calling him "lazy and not the brightest animal from the wild kingdom" (it is somewhat reminiscent of Bostock's words that the lion "is always clumsy"<sup>24</sup>) and also, "this relatively dull, lazy creature can, as we have seen, turn into an extremely vicious beast during the breeding season. I



assume that his fierce nature, aroused by the sexual urge, may be explained by the fact that lions live in colonies in which they must engage in brutal power struggle. The tiger, however, is a solitary creature, and there's much less of the aggressive drive for status that often leads to endless turmoil among lions. When tigers mate, the male and female get together in relative seclusion, so the chance for a fight is diminished. Lions, by contrast, go to war over matters of sexual prowess."<sup>25</sup>

Gebel-Williams agreed. "...the lion, who is more of a lover than other big cats, taking a female and building a family around her, tends to exhibit much more jealousy than a tiger, and that can lead to different problems for his trainer. Tigers do not experience as much jealousy, because they are real loners." Everybody in America thought he was a lion trainer, but he never was. "The lions never really offered the kind of friendship I look for with animals," according to Gebel-Williams. "Lions can be either very nice or very mean, and because they are also more family-oriented than other cats, they are harder to train. Tigers and leopards live independently, so it is easier to build individual relationships with them."<sup>26</sup>

Still, there are other views; this one from Proske. "It is impossible to realize the full impact of tiger nature unless you have actually experienced it yourself. Beneath his exquisite coat of yellow, black, and white beats a strong, determined, and cruel heart, nourished by savage blood. Here is nature's perfect creation for death and destruction. The lion, in comparison, is a great bluffer. I do not say this to disparage the lion. He is immensely dangerous when enraged. I have been pressed by lions so fiercely that, as we have seen, even when I fired blanks directly into their mouths they still kept on coming at me. One flick of a lion's paw can easily knock the gun from a man's hand. But he always warns you with his roar before he attacks. The tiger is more catlike. He never utters a sound before he strikes, and when he does it is with the speed of lightning."<sup>27</sup>

To sum up the comparison, European trainer Hans Brick offered an insight into the distinctive patterns of life of these carnivores: "A tiger is very much quicker in his reactions than a lion and, as with all psychological characteristics; the reason is to be found in the circumstances of his natural way of life. The features of his native land compel the tiger to think and act like greased lightning. He lives and hunts in high grass, which makes it impossible for him to see his prey any distance ahead, or to avoid his enemies in advance. It is in the nature of his habitat that he has always to resolve his situations with decision and reaction in a split second. A million years of living on his nerves have produced an animal tuned perceptually to the highest possible reactive efficiency. His eyes are a hair's breadth sharper than a lion's, and his nerves a significant twitch tauter. The lion, by contrast, hunts in sparse brush, where friend and foe are

visible well in advance. Also, lions hunt in groups. The tiger is a solitary killer."<sup>28</sup>

Switching the subject, picture a little boy quizzing his mentor Dhondiram Chavan, a master animal trainer. "No two lions are alike," that their personalities and temperament are vastly different, said the master. And yet it is "as important to know as that all lions do have certain characteristics in common." "If two lions can be different," the little boy demanded with all his naiveté, "how can they be the same?" The boy's name was Damoo Dhotre. "The basic characteristics are alike," the mentor explained; certain traits are common to all members of the species, "But within the species each animal is an individual. One is mean; one is generous; one is loving; one is a killer. You must become intimately acquainted with each animal personally to know what kind of person he really is."<sup>29</sup> The master's belief is uniformly addressed by trainers across the world.

### Each Animal is an Individual

"It is absolutely essential to learn to understand each cat, not to be mistaken in the character of any of them, to



Gunther Gebel-Williams RMA





observe their friendliness and animosities, and, finally, to know how to exploit this knowledge for the success of the act you plan,"<sup>30</sup> Alfred Court explained. According to Frank Bostock, "Some animals train easily; others learn their lessons with great diffidence and some reluctance. What one lion may learn in a week may take another a month; what one tiger may do in two lessons may take another one several months even to imitate feebly."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, "what works with one animal may not work with another," said Clyde Beatty. "For instance, Animal A may respond to a hand cue that mystifies Animal B, who can be made to execute the desired maneuver only by means of a voice cue or perhaps a combination of hand and voice cues. Other animals respond best to a combination of a soft whistle and set movements of my body."<sup>32</sup>

"The stupidest cat to pass through my hands was Jennie, a tigress," Beatty recalled; "Poor Jennie! She just couldn't grasp an idea quickly." She was taught to get up on a pedestal, "But I could not teach her to get off! Once on a pedestal, she made it her home, declining to come down again. There was no defiance about her unwillingness to descend. It was plain to be seen that she was puzzled, and, not knowing what to do, decided to stay put. After many weeks of effort, I managed to make Jennie understand that I did not want her to pose permanently on her pedestal."<sup>33</sup> (More on the pedestal training later.) "Every animal is different," as Gunther

Gebel-Williams experienced. "Not every tiger, for instance, can be trained to jump through a ring of fire. When I incorporated that trick into the tiger act, I had to find several from among the twenty I was working with at the time who were not afraid of fire."<sup>34</sup>

After World War II Alex Kerr took over an animal act, and wanted to improve and tidy up the act. "At least two of the animals had acquired a contempt for human beings that made them hard to control, and one lion, Nero, performed all the specialty tricks; if he had fallen sick the rest of the act would not have amounted to much." Therefore, "The ideal method of building up stock would be to buy twenty animals, choose six of the best-natured, and then sell the remainder. In these post-war days that is very much out of the question, as a lion's price has increased about ten times since before the war."<sup>35</sup> In choosing individuals suited for specific purposes, the Hagenbeck family was in an advantageous position; Carl Hagenbeck was a circus man, an international animal dealer as well as a zoo pioneer. "For my purpose I used no fewer than twenty-one lions, but so variable are the characters of animals, that only four turned out to have the necessary talent for the work."<sup>36</sup>

On the subject of selecting animals, we turn to an American college professor turned wild animal trainer, George Keller. Wrote Keller: "Some people believe that a wild animal trainer buys his animals from zoos; that they



are bred in captivity and, for this reason, are more or less harmless. The reverse is true. An animal bought from a zoo has had experience with man, has usually learned to distrust him, and so has become resentful and dangerous. Experienced trainers prefer to buy their animals, when possible, from dealers who import them direct from the jungles and plains where they have been captured. Such animals, knowing less of man, are more easily handled."<sup>37</sup> This voice, so widely rooted in the circle of trainers, echoed in the arena and under the tent.

"An animal learns by association. Though it is a common belief, fear is not the reason for his obedience to the trainer's command," revealed Bostock. "The easiest animal to train is one that is born in his native haunts and new to captivity. The reason is obvious. The one bred in captivity has nothing to fear from man, and knows his own strength and the fear he inspires. Accustomed from earliest infancy to the greatest care and coddling, he arrives one day at the stage of growth where he realizes the value of his own claws, for the use of them has shown him that human beings do not like to be scratched." A keeper, admiring the cub's pretty, innocent-looking little face, plays with him, "drops him suddenly one day when he feels the deep prick of the claws hidden in those paws. The next time someone comes along,

the cub may not be in the mood for handling; he remembers his past experience, that scratching means 'let go,' and he puts this into practice. His liberty is promptly secured, and he lies in peace in his cage."

The next keeper may get a deeper scratch and leaves the cub alone, a fact that the cub notes; in the process the cub "is gradually acquiring a deeper disrespect for man and his puerile ways; he is beginning to know the value of the little knives he carries sheathed in those paws, and he is very soon autocratic in his independence. He accepts his food as tributes and his care as homage due, and regards man simply as another and much weaker animal. Such an animal is difficult to train,"<sup>38</sup> Bostock concluded. Giving examples in lions, Boris Eder noted: "Pasha, who was born in the jungle, made a good trainee, for he was aware of the power of the trainer and stood in awe of it. Osman, on the other hand, was born in a cage, knew the trainer from his childhood, so to speak, and did not go in for hero-worship. A captive [wild-caught] animal is not used to being fed and cared for and values these things. An animal born in captivity is spoiled and is a very capricious and even impudent creature."<sup>39</sup>

"Give me animals fresh from the veldt or the jungle. Give 'em to me every time. Nine times out of ten they are more formidable than their cage-born brethren—stronger,



Roman Proske RMA





George Keller

more ferocious, and better supplied with primitive passion—but they are unspoiled and that makes up for everything else, with a margin to spare,” declared Clyde Beatty. “It is hard to convince an animal which has been reared in captivity that man is very formidable. To such a beast man is a softy (here ‘man’ signifies more specially the women who visit circus menageries), begging for a chance to pat your head and stroke your back,”<sup>40</sup> he continued.

But the world surrounding the big cage was changing rapidly. On top of the increasing price, international treaties and national laws regarding the importation of wild animals were looming over the horizon. Recalled Charly Baumann: “in the late 1950s Royal Bengal tigers were still available from the jungles, but the cost was rising too fast for our purse. It was then that I started breeding and raising tigers from my own stock. Fortunately, I became expert at it by the time the supply from the wilds dwindled to zero.”<sup>41</sup> (More on feline breeding later.)

### The Art of Training

A decade apart, American lion trainer Dick Clemens and I worked for Dr. Tadamichi Koga, director of Ueno Zoo in Tokyo, my boyhood hero. When my mentor visited Baraboo, Wisconsin in the mid-1970s I was already a resident of this country, and he introduced me to Dick, long

after his retirement. So on occasion Dick and I sat down and chatted. Now I wish I had a tape recorder (although he was known for tall tales). He said that one of the pleasures of training was communicating with lions. But I never got to see his show. In fact, of all the trainers I quoted in this article, I saw only three of them perform in person: Mabel Stark, Gunther Gebel-Williams and Charly Baumann. And I have had no experience in hands-on training of big cats. If I ever had any memorable episode in this line of work, it was when I was a cage boy for Mabel Stark for about ten days in southern Japan; I was a poor college student and gained a small bit of cash for my service. Before that experience, I used to see her whenever the World Animal Expo, the traveling menagerie she was working for, came to town.

At any rate, the topic is the art of animal training, and I am jumping ahead of the story. But since the name Mabel Stark surfaced, let me finish first. Nearing the end of her career she had to work in less-than-desirable circumstances in a foreign country. Yet in the rudimentary work conditions she maintained professionalism and personal dignity intact; I was impressed that she was always neatly dressed, carrying the aura of self-respect. It was in the 1950s and I, a high school kid, meant to praise her tigers in halting English, but the words were probably jumbled up. With stateliness and a disarming smile, Mabel said what she must have repeated a



million times: These animals are trained, but not tame.

So here it is, tame versus trained, an issue so confusing to the public. Alex Kerr had a tiger who “used to come everywhere with me; he came out shopping, walking in the streets and in the country, and he even took a pint of beer with me in a pub. ...Seeing him around the place so much, as quiet on the lead as any dog, people often assumed that he was tame. But the same principle applied to him as any other tiger; he was never tamed, but was simply trained to accept the sight—but not the touch—of humans and their ways, much as my other animals are trained to work in the performing cage among the various props.”<sup>42</sup> Court was frank on this: “Of the many animals I have trained I could not select a single one about which I could say, ‘This animal is tame,’ for the savage spirit remains, waiting its chance. And it is just this unconquerable spirit in the animals I work with that has provided me with both my greatest joys and my greatest dangers. Yet despite the tensions of my professional life, I would trade neither my joys *nor* my dangers for the life of any other man.”<sup>43</sup>

“‘Taming’ is merely inducing an animal to abandon its natural fierce disposition so far as to come under human control and be more or less sociable with man,” theorized Bostock. Moreover, “It is a delusion to think that a wild animal is ever really ‘tamed.’ He acquires, through passiveness and receptivity, an amenity to man’s control, and for the time being drops his ferocity.” As for training, “The first principle that is taught a trainer is: ‘Never let an animal know his power.’ The moment he realizes that, he is likely to use his terrible teeth, or still more terrible claws, for I always try to impress upon the trainees that each animal is, as it were, possessed of five mouths, as he can do as much, if not more, damage with each of his four feet as with his mouth. The very moment an animal realizes his power, his training is at an end.”<sup>44</sup>

That brings us back to Court for a moment: “As I have tried to show, the basic principles of animal training are simple and straightforward. Yet I know that the process must seem mysterious to the outsider. Over the years, at interviews in every country, journalists have asked me the same series of questions over a thousand times: ‘How do you train the cats?’” “In general, however, to become a good cat trainer there is, properly speaking, no secret.” More from Court: “One must find the special ‘key’ to each and use it to make the animal understand exactly what is required of him. To understand animals and to love them, to possess infinite patience, to be calm and capable of great physical endurance, and to have a little courage—these, as I see it, are the qualities necessary to a good trainer of cats.”<sup>45</sup> Hans Brick used the same term: “Unlike human beings, who seem to need years of training in nearly everything, animals need only a key. It is the breaker’s or trainer’s job to supply this key. Once this key has been properly supplied, the animal

will pick up your intentions like radar.”<sup>46</sup>

Brick avoided the use of “secret” in this context as Court does. As in any other work, there are certain things you would not understand unless you dive in and “get your feet wet.” From this author’s limited hands-on experience I know this much. You may admire and “love” elephants all you want. Yet, unless you actually walk in with elephants with an ankus in your hand, you would never know how it is to face the towering, huge grey masses slowly pushing you toward the concrete wall, ears as big as thunderheads flapping way above your head. And not to mention that pungent odor (music to my nose)! Nevertheless, the term “secret” carries a subtle nuance, depending on the individual trainer.

The most carefully guarded secret for a trainer, according to Damoo Dhotre: “When he starts to train an animal, the trainer not only wins the animal’s confidence and, if possible, his friendship, but also watches the animal hour after hour to become as familiar as he can with the animal’s personality and his habits. Then, when he knows what the animal is likely to do naturally, without any coaching, he encourages him to do that thing on command.”<sup>47</sup> Gunther Gebel-Williams reminisced: “I had to be perceptive and sensitive enough to understand what they were telling me by their actions or inactivity, and this enabled me to step inside their skins and really feel what my animals felt. That was the secret of my success. I reached deep inside, touched their spirits, and tried to become one of them. I could feel



George Keller



them doing the same to me. Nothing else was needed once we understood each other's essence."<sup>48</sup> Echoing this Kerr stated, "To me, the art of training is to get inside the mind of the animal you are working with and to know its mind as well as it knows its own. In this way you know exactly what your animal is capable of and you never ask it to do more than it can, so that it does not become fussed, unsure of itself, and resentful of its trainer."<sup>49</sup>

Going back to Hans Brick, he clearly delineated breaker and trainer. "First of all, the word 'breaker' has unfortunate associations for most people. A breaker does *not* break an animal's spirit; a wild animal whose spirit was broken would not make a performer. It may even be that a breaker enables a beast to 'find its spirit', for there are misanthropes in the jungle as well as in the world of men. The function of a breaker is to teach a beast to tolerate the presence of a human being in close proximity. He has then to teach it to recognise, and to sit on, its own seat, and to go, on command, from this 'home' seat to a pedestal standing in any situation in the cage or enclosure." By contrast "The 'trainer' is the one who, on the basis of this simple introduction, gradually builds up the further tricks required by the particular act that is to be produced." Also, "The breaker may of course go on from there and act as his own trainer, but the distinction

should be clear. Most breakers can and do train, but trainers cannot break; if they could, they would be breakers." Additionally, "Today the real breaker is one of a diminishing band."<sup>50</sup>

Opinions by trainers vary depending on the topics, as we will see; they are at times in solid agreement but other times they widely diverge. If a trainer begins with a wild-caught animal its age may be out of his control. But if the trainer has a choice, at what age would he start to train a cat?

Gebel-Williams on tigers: "I started when they were very young and small—between six months and one year old. I took them into my home and made them feel comfortable and safe; I let them play around me but not with me."<sup>51</sup> In sharp contrast Hans Brick asked, "Is it worthwhile to train young cubs? My answer is 'No.'" His opinion is that a cub is a mischief-maker. "The ideal age for training is from twenty months to two years, or even older,"<sup>52</sup> he insisted. Circus artist and author Bill Ballantine quoted Mabel Stark as saying that one and one half to two years of age as the best time to start,<sup>53</sup> while Roman Proske thought that the ideal age is between one and two years.<sup>54</sup> "Four animals out of five can be taught to perform if they are started early enough—that is, when they are between two and two and a half years old,"



Mabel Stark



Gunther Gebel-Williams



commented Clyde Beatty even though he has succeeded in training cats four or six years old: "An animal that has passed the two-and-a-half-year mark is likely to have become so fixed in his habits that he is a difficult pupil."<sup>55</sup>

Trainers agree, generally, on one point: the basics of schooling beginner animals. After the trainer has made thorough observations on each cat, a time-consuming process, the cat is transferred from the individual cage through the tunnel to the arena (the big cage). At this time the trainer may or may not be in the cage with the animal. Beatty's approach: "I 'break' him to go to the right or the left when he leaves the tunnel and enters the arena. Whichever side I dictate, that's his side of the arena during the early stages of his career."<sup>56</sup> Said Gebel-Williams: "I like to work gradually. I will put only one animal inside the cage or ring and practice with him. Then I introduce a second, and a third, and so on."<sup>57</sup> Added Baumann: "Also, from the beginning I constantly talk to an animal, especially to get him to respond to his name."<sup>58</sup> Concerning names, "I cannot control animals properly unless they know and respond to their names,"<sup>59</sup> according to Kerr. Then comes the important step.

#### Act Begins with Pedestal

"Once acclimated to the cage, the new tiger's first lesson is simply that of sitting on a seat. We call it 'seatbreaking,' and it's as basic to tiger training as two plus two is to arith-

metic," wrote Baumann. "I place a fairly tall pedestal against the side of the cage with bits of meat and kind words I entice the tiger to climb onto the large pedestal. From then on, that spot is developed by every means possible as his home in the cage. It takes about three days to seatbreak a young tiger, and once accomplished I am extremely careful never to scold or punish the animal any time he's on his seat." His verbal command is "Seat!" or "*An platz!*" in German.<sup>60</sup>

Teaching methods of "seating" vary. Some never use the meat reward. Brick elaborated: "Discard the whip entirely, and take a stick in each hand. Extend the stick so as to form the familiar V, but this time do not aim to subtend the animal's body while he is facing you."<sup>61</sup> Beatty would often spend a whole week or longer to teach a cat to place its front feet against the seat; females are usually quicker than males to acknowledge that he is the boss, but for a die-hard lioness it took two months "to mount a pedestal and to leap from it to the arena floor."<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, back to Baumann: "One of the difficulties of seatbreaking is that sooner or later I must reverse my demand on the animal. After several days of getting him to stay in place and not leave under any circumstance, I have to train him to get down on my command. To do this without totally confusing the poor creature is a delicate, time-consuming task requiring the utmost patience. Indeed, it can take as much time if not more time than seatbreaking itself." (That reminds us of aforementioned Jennie, Clyde Beatty's tigress.) "And so it goes, one relatively minute step after another," Baumann continued. "To borrow from computer terminology, the trainer has to 'program' his tigers to perform one basic element of his total bag of tricks at a time." Once this basic step, seatbreaking, has been imprinted on the cat's mind, he was ready for specialized tricks or concerted movements called for in the script of the projected act.

Thus, teaching an animal to stay on (and off) the pedestal establishes the basis. An animal is now capable of doing a wide assortment of tricks—sit-up, lay-down, globe-rolling, jump through a hoop, a walk on a tight-rope and the list goes on. "Of course, each step of each trick described here in a sentence or two may consume hours and hours or days and days per tiger. It all requires attention to detail and infinite patience. What's more, it can only be accomplished in limited training periods of about forty-five minutes' duration. Any longer and a training session becomes counterproductive. My nerves fray, I lose patience and the animal's education can even slip into reverse,"<sup>63</sup> explained Baumann.

It might be noted at this point: "The main thing is that the animals learn what is wanted of them," as Roman Proske believed. "Once they know, they can be taught any number of tricks without feeling they are being made to do something against their will."<sup>64</sup>

Unbeknownst to the viewing public, it could be tricky to teach seemingly simple tricks, trainers reveal. "One of





the most difficult tricks to teach a tiger is roll over,"<sup>65</sup> said Mabel Stark. In agreement that "the trick is generally considered very difficult for the animal to perform," Alex Kerr went into detail in his experience with Nanda, a tigress. He first wanted her to crouch, one of the most difficult positions to get from an animal. After so many pieces of meat were thrown on the floor, by chance she lay down but bringing her over on one side was not easy either. More pieces of meat were added; since her shoulders were tilted as she stretched for the meat, the hind quarters followed after the center point of balance, and she "rolled" without realizing it.<sup>66</sup> Clyde Beatty seemed to think that in a group situation, when a cat "lies down on the arena floor, what is uppermost in his mind is that he is vulnerable to attack by the other cats. For of course the final phase of this trick is to get him to perform it against the whole banked group of pedestaled lions and tigers."<sup>67</sup> The big cats are known to distrust each other, the point Baumann brought up next.

Beginning with seating, animals have now been taught various tricks. Still, at this point the animals are far from ready for the audience. "The tricks have to be assembled into an act, and that reveals how well you have succeeded in the animals' basic training. It's one thing to train a single tiger to leave his seat, walk to the center of the cage, lie down and roll over twice, all on cue. But it's much more difficult

and challenging to train five tigers to leave their seats one after the other, walk to the center of the cage, lie down forming a line of animals, all rubbing fur with one another, and then, on cue, have them all roll over twice, precisely together—and not end up in a massive fur-flying battle. It's also one thing to train one tiger to sit up alone on the floor, but a far different proposition to train ten to step down from their seats, one after another, and sit up in unison in a tightly packed line."

And here comes the final consideration in Baumann's plan. "After all, the tiger trained in the relative quiet of our Florida winter quarters [of RB&BB] can hardly be expected to walk nonchalantly into a noisy, flashy arena, with music, lights and thousands of shouting, applauding spectators, and think nothing of it. Therefore, the training always includes a program of acclimating my animals to the circus."<sup>68</sup>

Putting a group of tigers together adds such a challenge. Consider, then, difficulty in organizing a group of mixed species. "Lions and tigers instinctively hate each other, and in their native state look with contempt on jackals and hyenas," noted Bostock. His description on a superbly assembled performance: "in these mixed groups, lions, tigers, hyenas, sloth-bears, polar bears, and Tibet bears are all together in the same arena; one sits quietly on his pedestal while another goes through his act; the lion has to associ-



ate with the hyena," moreover: "In arranging a mixed group, each animal has to be studied carefully; his idiosyncrasies must be humored, his characteristics must be known and ever borne in mind; the animosity between the wild beasts must be taken into careful consideration, and the methods of teaching must vary with each animal according to its special traits."<sup>69</sup>

For Gebel-Williams, "It took two years to train the leopards; three years to train the mixed act with three tigers, two horses, and an African elephant; and another couple of years to train the teeterboard act, in which an elephant hit a teeterboard on which I was standing, sending me backward into the air and somersaulting onto the back of another elephant."<sup>70</sup>

While still in Germany he decided to put a tiger on an elephant's back, which turned out to be difficult. "The problem was that every time the tiger jumped on the elephant, it bit the elephant's blanket in an attempt to bite the elephant." So he fed the tiger a piece of meat to avoid biting of the elephant, yet the old habits die hard. "Bengal was the first tiger I trained for this act, and no matter what I did with him, he bit the elephant's blanket every time he jumped on its back. I never got him to break that habit. He would sit on the elephant's back without a problem, as long as he had bitten the blanket first."<sup>71</sup> Clyde Beatty also trained a cat to land on a horse's back, after leaping through a fire hoop. "This trick requires a horse that isn't afraid of wild animals and is at the same time strong enough to stand having four or five hundred pounds of flying lion or tiger land suddenly on his back. Most horses have a deadly fear of lions and tigers, and for arena work with these jungle creatures a horse must be not only fearless but devoid of nerves."<sup>72</sup>

(As is often the case, the reality of managing a show can put anyone under heavy time pressure. A young man with no previous experience was told to take over a six lion act from a trainer in two weeks. The lions were already well trained, and after twelve sessions with the trainer he succeeded to run the act by himself. It was in 1951 in Germany and the young man's name was Charly Baumann.)<sup>73</sup>

Why, one might ask, can't animals' little idiosyncratic behavior be utilized into a trick? That actually happens. Nosey was a lion. Nearby was a lioness in another act whom he could not see, but he responded to her vocally. George Keller noted this behavior; when Nosey started to open his mouth, Keller raised his hand and said, "Talk it up, Nosey!" and that turned into a cue. Nosey became the lion who roared on cue.<sup>74</sup> Damoo Dhotre remembered that Dick Clemens once had a big lion. When Dick said "Waltz," the lion would immediately start pivoting in circles as though dancing a waltz. Visitors asked, "Mr. Clemens, how in the world did you teach that lion to dance?" He didn't; it was a nervous habit and Clemens taught him to do it on command. At another time, Dick saw a lion who had a habit of

yawning frequently. When he was looked at, his jaws were spread wide apart. "Damoo," Dick said, "this lion is going to be my head-in-mouth lion." Before long, he was the lion into whose mouth Clemens stuck his head.<sup>75</sup>

"Personally, I dislike the 'head-in-the-mouth' stunt," commented Clyde Beatty, while ensuring that he is not criticizing good trainers who still used it. "Perhaps the reason why I dislike the stunt so much is that, more than any other trick of animal-training, it has become the basis for the weirdest of yarns."<sup>76</sup> And he is not alone in this view. Back in Germany when young Charly Baumann used the head-in-the-mouth stunt, Willi Hagenbeck treated him with icy silence. Baumann later noted: "Such a trick, he firmly believed, lacked class for both trainer and animal, and as such was something a Hagenbeck man would avoid."<sup>77</sup> Former military serviceman Pat Anthony (real name: Anthony Patrick Vitanza) learned to become a trainer under the G. I. Bill after World War II. When he was new in the trade, he told Bill Ballantine that "the main reason I don't stick my head in a lion's mouth is because it's a display of stupidity. It belittles the wild animal and knocks down the standard of the act."<sup>78</sup>

Of course, such judgments boil down to the person's subjective viewpoint. There is a saying amongst elephant keepers that no two elephant men agree with each other completely, and that applies to cat trainers. It also depends upon the personal style and a sharp division in choices is by no means uncommon; here is an example.

As a safety precaution, Baumann subscribed to the two-man rule: "it's insane to work in a cage unless someone with the courage and capability to help is immediately available. As I practiced my trade in Europe, I learned firsthand of two trainers who had broken the rule and paid the penalty."<sup>79</sup> Yet Hans Brick, another international man, insisted: "When I break animals or train them, I never, never allow any help from outside. Trainers who do this are not absolute masters of their animals. What will the trainer who relies on outside help do in an emergency if the man he depends on isn't there? It is no bravado on my part that makes me decline any outside assistance. It is just that my experience shows that a man in a cage with wild animals is safest when he relies on himself, if he knows his business."<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, opinions differ amongst trainers on food reward. As mentioned before, Alex Kerr and Gunther Gebel-Williams used food reward to get the results. Also in this camp was Roman Proske. His protocol: "I taught my first group of lions to leap from pedestal to pedestal by the system of reward, until the actual piece of meat could be dispensed with and the gesture used instead." He maintained, "The meat reward remains the incentive and repetition of a trick develops a pattern of behavior."<sup>81</sup> At the other end of spectrum stood Clyde Beatty, who criticized a Hungarian trainer's practice "of trying to buy the good will of the big



cats with his little award of meat" amounting to a "bribery policy" (and received a hurt look every time he brought it up).<sup>82</sup> Enter Mabel Stark, who seemed to sit in the middle: "I never use food as a reward except occasionally in breaking a new animal to do an unusual trick. But I never forget to say 'Good boy' or 'Atta girl' when the trick has been mastered or well done."<sup>83</sup>

Tools of the trade also generate a variety of strong preferences. What sounds quite logical is the idea that a tool is an extension of the trainer's body, just as an ankus is an extension of the elephant handler's hand. Tools are no weapons, as some members of the public choose to believe; that little metal stick will in no way stop a charging elephant! "Always hold this (stick) in front of you when you work with cats. The stick will attract them and they will tend to grab at the stick instead of you,"<sup>84</sup> little boy Damoo Dhotre's mentor would tell him. With regard to the process of training his animal, Kerr said: "He has come to recognize the whip and the cane that I have always carried as being parts of myself—he has never been afraid of them in their own right—and I can now bring them into play to help maneuver him." A cat is bound to grab the stick. "He assumes that he has bitten me, as he considers that the stick is part of me, and his respect widens since I am still there, unharmed, in front of him."<sup>85</sup>

#### Chair or No Chair: European vs. American Styles

So, weapon or not, it—stick, pole or cane, whatever you call it—provides a level of protection. A whip is another tool, used by many. But the repertoire of tools takes a different form in the hands of the man who epitomized what is known as the American style, Clyde Beatty: "In a normal circus season I use from sixty to seventy chairs, which are my principal defense inside the arena. Old-time trainers used a pole, which gave an oncoming animal its initial point of attack, and which it could grab in its teeth and chew on." (In late 2012 my wife and I saw a special circus exhibit at Bard Graduate Center Gallery in New York, and were amazed as we gazed at one of his chairs with numerous bite marks.) Continuing, he said: "The advantage of a chair is that instead of one point, it has four, which distract the animal's attention somewhat, as he can't decide where to attack first."<sup>86</sup>

Chair, gun, and whip must be ready for immediate use when Beatty entered the big cage, and it is here a division is set. Hans Brick asked many trainers why they used a revolver with blanks. "The answer I get is always the same: to frighten them away, in a moment of danger, with the bang of the gun. This is just not the case: all wild beasts are used to bigger bangs in the jungle—think of the terrific thunderstorms in the tropics. The efficacy of the bang is to be found in a subtler explanation: *the bang makes a lion blink and so spoils his aim.*"<sup>87</sup>



Sigrid and Gunther Gebel-Williams

Obviously, there existed an element of showmanship in Beatty. Charly Baumann on Beatty's style: "U.S. audiences have been raised on trainers who use guns, chairs and sticks to emphasize the dangers rather than the training of their animals. Success for me is measured by the animals' achievements demonstrated with little attention to the hazards faced by the trainer." "He provoked his animals by poking the legs of a chair in their faces, snapping their rumps with a whip and shooting off blanks in a pistol. With these tactics, Beatty himself created much of the danger, and he was frequently mauled by his animals. In my opinion, he was more showman than trainer." Yet, "I should conclude by saying that Clyde Beatty and I were never competitors, for I came to America just shortly before he died. While disagreeing with his claims as a trainer, I respected his showmanship. Likewise he respected me as a trainer and once stated that I had 'the best tiger act in the world.'"<sup>88</sup> Gebel-Williams revealed that he respected Beatty's work "because I knew how dangerous and difficult it was, but I never tried to be like him."<sup>89</sup>

The subject on circus animal training, particularly of carnivores, ultimately leads to the age-old discussion and comparison of the difference between European and American methods. It almost appears that when trainers on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean speak about their arts, they cannot erase that one name from their collective minds. Alex Kerr, representing an example: "I think one person who has



unwittingly done British trainers more harm than anyone is the American trainer, Clyde Beatty. The American public is used to a different sort of act to the British public and they admire spectacle, not specialty. They like to see masses of animals in the cage at once, and they want the thrill of watching a man 'battle' with his beasts." Kerr continued:

"I am not trying to criticize Beatty personally. He has made a great name for himself with his type of act—blood and bluster guns firing and beasts snarling and fighting—and he has carried on that way because it was expected of him by his public. Indeed, he is now the best-known lion trainer in the world; he had enormous publicity from his film *The Big Cage* in the 'thirties, and his post-war film *The Ring of Fear*. But it is through his fame and from the book he published, which had wide publicity here, that he has done us harm, for the British public has come to think that his methods are necessarily our methods."<sup>90</sup> Beatty spoke himself on his act: "Mine is a fighting act, as I have said—an 'untamable' act, as it is known in the circus world—but it is good to be able to depend upon a few animals to keep the peace, especially those that sit high up."<sup>91</sup> George Keller summed up the fighting act this way: "It is constructed to give the audience the impression that the animals are vicious, and that they want to destroy their trainer. In the public presentation of the act, as well as during the process of training, the trainer drives his animals with whip and gun. He carries a kitchen chair, or keeps it besides him, to ward off attack."<sup>92</sup>

"He [Beatty] was a consummate showman among wild animal trainers, no one but Gunther Gebel-Williams even came close. Others who presented acts similar to Beatty's included Terrell Jacobs, Dick Clemens, Joe Arcaris, Pat Anthony, Roger Smith and Dave Hoover. The last named became Beatty's replacement for many years on the circus bearing Beatty's name," comments circus historian Richard Reynolds. Concerning the popularity of the fighting act, "I will offer that it satisfied the public's macabre interest in seeing or hoping to see the trainer get killed or wounded. ...I guess it is akin to watching a stock car race with all the excitement caused when the cars smash into one another at well over 100 mph and the crowd anticipates someone might get killed or badly injured."<sup>93</sup>

To put it in international perspective, we turn to British wild animal trainer and impresario Jim Clubb. He offers the following: "It is a fallacy that Europe did not have fighting acts. In the UK we called them 'rousing acts.' However, they were not the same type as Clyde Beatty and also not on the same scale. I have only found one reference to a trainer using the safety cage. This was Captain Tommy Kayes. British trainers definitely worked with chair and whip, but only in the early days did we use the revolver. Tommy Kayes and Dick Chipperfield Sr. used revolvers before World War II. Dick Chipperfield Sr., who taught me, was an expert with these types of acts. He always said to me 'A rousing act will beat a quiet act, no matter how good the routine and tricks







were.' This was definitely the case at that time." Clubb adds, "The French also had plenty of rousing acts, but this was not the case in Germany, where they were very rare."<sup>94</sup>

Germany, it is safe to say, is home to the other style of training, sometimes called the quiet, or the "class" act. To borrow from George Keller again: "This is more like the kind you see in Europe. In this type of act there is no attempt to present the savage side of the animals' nature. The animals are not prodded into giving the impression of being about to attack the trainer. The emphasis is on a beautiful and artistic performance."<sup>95</sup> To cite Richard Reynolds again: "The first really significant import of the European method (as it had evolved up to that time) was when John Ringling North induced the French trainer, Alfred Court to bring to Ringling-Barnum his huge assemblage of trained wild animals, debuting with the 1940 edition. His act was presented simultaneously in all three rings and included lions, tigers, jaguars (spotted and black), leopards (spotted and black), snow leopard, pumas, polar and Asian black bears plus Great Dane dogs."<sup>96</sup>

In more recent years, Gebel-Williams introduced a distinct style to the American audience, something they were not used to seeing. His view in historical context: "In the latter half of the twentieth century, people would have stoned me if I went into a ring with a pistol, chair, and whip, and if Clyde Beatty were alive today, he would have to change his

style of training to move ahead with the times."<sup>97</sup> That said, there are the American circus faithful who firmly believe that the fighting style is the most exciting and the best; for them Beatty remains the hero. The discussion on contrasting styles, as well as the perception by the viewing public, requires a certain delicacy. That also brings up questions as to how the European style began, and the historical background of its birth. It is fitting, at this point, to trace the origin of the European style to Carl Hagenbeck himself and listen to his own words (albeit in English translation):

"For many years, indeed ever since I could remember, I had been greatly distressed at the cruel methods of teaching animals to perform, which were then in vogue. My enthusiasm for my own calling originated more, if I may say so, in a love for all living creatures than in any mere commercial instinct. I had no doubt inherited this passion from my father, and under the circumstances in which I found myself there was, of course, every opportunity of cultivating the taste. I do not intend to imply that I have not also had an eye to the main chance; but I can, I think, say with perfect truth that I am, and always have been, a naturalist first and a trader afterwards. This being the case, it was only natural that I, in common I am sure with all other lovers of animals, should be greatly distressed at the wicked ill-treatment to which 'tamed' beasts were in those days subjected." By cruel methods, Hagenbeck noted: "The period when unfortunate animals were driven to jump over a bar from dread of a whip or a red-hot iron—a disgrace to the humanity of man!—is gone by."<sup>98</sup>

Carl Hagenbeck continued: "For many years I had been pondering over this subject, and I had come to the conclusion that the prevalent mode of procedure was not only cruel, but also stupid and ineffectual. Brutes, after all, are being akin to ourselves. Their minds are formed on the same plan as our minds; the differences are differences of degree only, not of kind. They will repay cruelty with hatred, and kindness with trust. What, therefore, could be more foolish than the senseless manner in which every spark of intelligence was driven out of the hapless pupils? I knew full well from long and intimate association with the lower animals that their understanding develops wonderfully by close friendship with man, and I was convinced that far more could be achieved by gentleness and sympathy than was ever accomplished by tyrannical cruelty."<sup>99</sup> In 1887 he established a circus in Hamburg, and found a trainer by the name of Eduard Deyerling, to whom he taught his idea about training.

According to Hagenbeck, "The first experiment in this 'gentle' training, as I will call it, was made with lions during the years 1887-89." As previously described, he selected four lions for this purpose and "the success with the remaining four lions was nothing short of astounding. They carried out all manner of tricks, the climax of the performance coming when the trainer harnessed three of the mighty carni-



vores to a chariot and drove triumphantly around the cage. The troupe first appeared in the Nouveau Cirque in Paris in 1889, and during the next few years they were exhibited in many other towns, bringing me, I may mention incidentally, a very large profit." That led to the plan of sending performing animals to the great exhibition at Chicago in 1893, which was accomplished with great difficulty. "Since that time I have sent out many troupes of performing animals into all parts of the world, notably to the great exhibition of St. Louis in 1904, and all these are trained on my own humane system, which is, indeed, now adopted by all respectable animal tamers."<sup>100</sup>

The continuity in the thoughts of so many talented wild animal trainers speaks to the heart of the relationship between a good trainer and the animals with which they work. While techniques and presentations may vary, at their core, the deep respect and great passion that the trainers examined had for their animals are the common threads that can be traced in the stories of these men and women who have worked with the big cats. **Bw**

## Endnotes

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# The Death of Volante

by Steve Gossard

Since there are no known images of the aerialist Volante or the sharp shooter Jennie Franklin, this article is illustrated with cabinet card photographs of performers from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of these images were selected from the Tibbals Collection at the Ringling Museum.



In April of 1878 a twenty-three-year-old woman named Lottie Mailly (or Maloy) joined a variety troupe, playing an engagement at the Mozart Garden Music Hall in Brooklyn, New York. She called herself "Volante," which is defined (Merriam-Webster on line) in Italian as "flying." Some time earlier, while living with her sister, Jennie Lafferty, in Williamsburg Lottie had decided to reinvent herself, and "determined to go upon the stage."<sup>1</sup> She had taken instruction from "a lady acquaintance who was a professional trapeze performer."<sup>2</sup> Lottie had debuted at the Olympic Theatre, in Brooklyn, then performed at the London Theatre and the Volks Garden in New York City; and later at the London and Church Street Opera House in New Haven, Connecticut before going to the Mozart. The Mozart Garden Music Hall was the largest beer hall in Brooklyn, and the variety company began their tour there before moving on to the Opera House at Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

The performance by this company consisted mainly of musical numbers: a family performing "musical specialties," two serio-comic vocalists, a lady who "sings and dances," a woman who sang bass, and two brothers who displayed some "remarkably high kicking."<sup>3</sup> In addition to the musical numbers the program featured Volante on the trapeze and Miss Jennie Franklin, a specialist at marksmanship. Jennie Franklin had performed as a "waiter girl" in New York City under her maiden name, Josie Fowler. She met the California light weight boxing champion, Pete Lawler, in February of 1878. "He took her with him to Deagle's theater, in New Haven," it was later reported, "but they got into trouble there because Lawler knocked over a New Haven boxer." Jennie left him and "took to light stage business." She met someone named Franklin, who taught her to shoot, and began performing under his name.

Left, Nellie Leona, known as "Octavia", circa 1899.



This was the story that was given to the press in April of 1878; the truth was a bit more complicated. The company listed in the New York Clipper performing at Mozart Garden March 16<sup>th</sup> did not include "Jennie Franklin," but did include a "Jennie and Albert Lawrence."<sup>4</sup> This was likely the same Jennie Lawrence, 20 years of age, who had been listed in the 1870 census as living in Brooklyn with her mother, Susan M. Fowler and two older siblings, Willa and Kate. By 1884 Jennie would be remarried and living in Minnesota with her husband and twelve-year-old daughter. There is no need to question Jennie's integrity, but obviously much of her history was not being disclosed to the press. Her story is still something of a mystery today.

Jennie Franklin, "the daring shot," was five foot six in height, "lithe and straight as an Indian."<sup>5</sup> She weighed 157 pounds. Her gun weighed twenty-nine pounds. Her performance consisted of firing from one end of the stage to the other, snuffing out candles, target shooting, and other feats of accuracy; finishing by splitting an apple placed on her husband's head while firing over her shoulder with the aid of a mirror. This was a feat made popular some time before by the team of Frank Fayne and his wife, Clara Butler. On April 3<sup>rd</sup> Jennie's husband was called out of town on business, and the girl called "Volante" was asked to substitute in his place.

Lottie Mailly (Volante) stood for the sharpshooter, Jennie Franklin, for three nights on the stage. Jennie performed successfully, striking the apple with "great coolness and steadiness... with precision" for two nights.<sup>6</sup> She had "the steadiness of a Creedmoor rifleman" it was said.<sup>7</sup> The events of the third evening in the small town of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, however, were a sensation, featured in far ranging newspapers from Washington, D.C.; to Memphis, Tennessee; to St. Paul, Minnesota; to Bismarck, North Dakota; to Anderson Court House, South Carolina and Rayville, Louisiana.

On April 5<sup>th</sup> Lottie Mailly performed her trapeze act as Volante just prior to the marksmanship display. For the finale of her act it was announced that Miss Jennie Franklin would perform the "backward shot," and split the apple from the head of Volante. Jennie wore "a blue velvet cape, knotted to her shoulders with ribbons, hung jauntily down her back, leaving her arms free, blue short skirts, snow white tights, and blue leggings."<sup>8</sup> Volante "stepped alertly to her station" and placed the apple "in her luxuriant hair."<sup>9</sup> Jennie Franklin placed the rifle on her shoulder and sighted through the mirror placed in the wings. She took aim and shot Volante straight through the forehead. Some sources stated later that Lottie shrieked before dropping to the floor. Jennie later testified that she thought at first Lottie had been faking for the sake of the audience.

I laughed when she fell, and sat on the floor with her hands on her knees; I thought she was making believe, as she had done before, to scare the audience. Then I said, "My God!" I went over to her and I knew at once the bullet had come out again. I saw a few drops of blood under the hair just over the forehead. The wound in her forehead didn't bleed. I wanted then to wash her head and let her go to sleep, but the doctor inserted a probe, which cut the principle vein and carries the blood all through the head... They wouldn't believe me when I told them the bullet had come out, but they had to afterward... I attended her, and when her right side was paralyzed she tried to talk to me, but she couldn't shape her lips to speak the words. She would take my arm in her left hand and draw me to her, and when I stood close beside her, leaning over her bed, she would put up her hand and raise her left eye so that she could see me.<sup>10</sup>

An eyewitness later stated that Volante had fallen to the stage, across the footlights. "Her hair took fire on the instant, when Tom Murray, who was on the stage at the time announcing the different shots, picked the unfortunate lady up, and laid her on a mattress. Physicians were immediately summoned, who pronounced the wound fatal."<sup>11</sup> This statement differs somewhat from that of Jennie Franklin; however, with the confusion and trauma of the incident one can hardly be expected to retain total recall of the events.

Following the tragedy Jennie Franklin was said to be "half crazed with horror at the occurrence."<sup>12</sup> In just short of a month, from the time of the fatal shooting to her interview with the reporter for the *New York Sun*, Jennie had lost 38 pounds. Her complexion had gone pale, but she had recovered from the initial shock of the tragedy. She had given another exhibition of shooting on the stage of Tony Pastor's Theatre for the afternoon performance on April 30.

Her husband fastened apples on the face of a target, and she split them in two with bullets. She extinguished a lighted candle and broke a clay pipe. The range was the width of the stage. At last, turning her back to the target, she pointed the gun over her shoulder, and taking aim over the reflection of the gun in a mirror, at the reflection of the apple—missed. She tried three times without success, and then bringing her gun to an order arms, with an angry pout, bowed and retired, the spectators heartily applauding.<sup>13</sup>

Jennie explained to the reporter:

I could have hit the apple if the audience had





kept still. Just as I was raising the gun I could hear people say—

“That’s the shot she killed Volante in.”

“I had to miss then. I can hear what people say if it’s only a whisper in the back of the room. Then some ladies in one of the boxes made remarks about me...”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, having lost nearly forty pounds in less than a month, and still dealing with the trauma of the tragedy may also have caused her to be unsteady while holding the twenty-nine pound gun.

Jennie had a theory about how the tragedy came about: “I want people to know one thing, that I never shoot below the mark. If I miss, the bullet always goes above it. I think Volante must have breathed so (drawing a long breath), after getting off the trapeze that night, and threw her head up.”<sup>15</sup> There is another explanation that will be discussed later.

Tommy, the manager for Murray, Mack and Jefferson, proprietors of the Pawtucket Opera House, later submitted a statement to the *New York Clipper* providing details of the accident. He stated that Lottie had only been with the troupe for a short time, and “as she was a stranger to us all, we could not find out where she belonged until Saturday, when we received a telegram from her sister, who lives in Williamsburg asking if she was dead. We answered back immediately that she was living and her sister came on, arriving here Sunday morning at six o’clock.” Lottie’s brother was also notified, and he was on his way from Phelps, New York at the time of her death at 8:40 P.M. on Sunday evening.

Jennie Franklin was placed under arrest. The theater was a scene of stunned silence at first, then, “Everything was now in confusion, both before and behind the footlights, the audience being in a state of terror at the denouement of what had promised to be only a pleasant bit of sensation.”<sup>16</sup> Jennie was released from jail soon after. The inquest, as reported by the *New York Clipper*, April 20, determined that Volante’s death was the unintentional result of a rifle shot wound, and the jury further recommended that the town council prohibit all shows in which human life was put at risk. At the inquest Jennie stated that she had approached the prostrate girl upon the stage and exclaimed; “Thank God! The bullet is not in her head; there are two holes.” This was somewhat different from the statement that she would give to the reporter of *The Sun* in New York on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May.

Unfortunately, but, perhaps predictably, a rumor had immediately spread that Jennie had shot Volante intentionally in a fit of jealousy over the divided attentions of her husband, Mr. Franklin. The newspapers immediately suppressed this assumption. “It could not be ascertained that



Above left, Dona Lucia

Below left, Mlle. Gilsfort



there was any cause for Mrs. Franklin's being jealous of Mlle. Volante," the *Evening Star* newspaper, stated. "She was not generally intimate with men, but seemed devoted to her profession, which was that of a trapeze performer." Furthermore, Jennie was not married to anyone named "Franklin," but had used the professional name of her trainer.

The newspapers prematurely predicted that this incident would "of course, put a stop to all such exhibitions, no matter who may attempt them."<sup>17</sup> The mayor of Brooklyn sent a message on April 19<sup>th</sup> to William F. Cody, who was playing in an Indian drama there, "requesting that that portion of his programme where he shoots an apple from the head of one of the performers, and the ashes from a cigar held in a man's mouth, be omitted."<sup>18</sup> The New York Tribune published an editorial April eighth stating that performances of this nature should be banned. "Some bad accidents have resulted from the trapeze exhibitions, but they have not been numerous; and many circus feats are much less dangerous than they appear to be." But in the case of the rifle sharpshooter, "there is always danger in the shooting trick, whatever the skill of the performer... the law should protect people whenever it is possible against the consequences of their own rashness."

May 1 Jennie stated, "I am paying \$5 a week for the board of a woman who used to stand for me. She wants to do so again. I have to support my child, and it is all I can do. I can't save anything. You look at me here and you don't know me, but you would know me well if I should tell you the name of my family in Brooklyn. That is a secret I have kept through all my troubles."<sup>19</sup> It is an open question as to just what name Jennie was referring to; whether her maiden name of Fowler, or her married name of Lawrence. She may have been trying to protect her husband's good name. Her husband, Albert Lawrence, may have been the same person who performed as a baritone on the stage in 1870 and 1871.<sup>20</sup> At any rate, their marriage did not last after the tragic events of 1878.

The *Clipper* reported that Jennie would give an exhibition of rifle shooting "without a human target" in Woodsocket on April 13. She gave an exhibition of shooting at a Boston variety theater in early May 1878 in which she was described as "Jennie Franklin, the famous daring shot, and principal in the recent terrible catastrophe and innocent killing of a woman on the stage at Pawtucket."<sup>21</sup> A short blurb was run in various newspapers in the western states from 1878 to 1880 stating that "Josie Fowler of New Haven snuffs candles and cores apples with a revolver. The young men are exceedingly respectful in their attentions to her."<sup>22</sup> This was, no doubt, a bit of advertising. Jennie was obviously still working as a trick shot, but now once again under the name of "Josie Fowler." She may or may not have been



Above right, Ada Blanche, circa 1890  
Below right, Josephine Smoros, circa 1894





the same Jennie Fowler who was listed as a jig dancer at the Theatre Comique in Cairo, Illinois in February of 1879, but she was certainly the same Jennie Franklin who attended "The Rifles' Excursion" at Marshall Hall in Washington, D. C. July 28 of 1881.<sup>23</sup>

By 1884 Jennie had assumed a new identity once again. *The Little Falls Transcript* of Little Falls, Minnesota reported June 6<sup>th</sup> of that year that "The people of Tuckahoe, Dennisville and the upper end of Cape May county have, for some time past, been startled by the wonderful exploits with the rifle of a mysterious Amazon named Jennie Moore, who lives in an isolated cabin in the pines, on the bay side, about 4 miles from Woodbine station, on the West Jersey railroad."<sup>24</sup> The woman in question was said to be about thirty years of age, of "splendid physical development," and married to a man named Jackson Moore, a poor woodcutter working for a glass factory. "It is stated that they came from Texas," the reporter went on, "The woman has a pretty daughter, 12 years of age, who can sing like a nightingale. It is believed that the woman is from Brooklyn. She says that for several years she traveled with a show under the stage name of Jennie Franklin, giving exhibitions with her rifle."

Jennie Moore, it was said, astonished the neighbors by giving remarkable exhibitions of marksmanship.

She can light a parlor match with a rifle ball, and part an apple on (sic.) the William Tell style, resting on her husband's head. A favorite shot is to hit the apple, while in that position, by a shot with the back turned and taking aim in a looking glass. Snuffing candles and clipping the ashes from a lighted cigar while it is held between the teeth of a man, are trifling matters to her. It is regarded as exceedingly strange that a woman with her refined tastes, culture and amazing skill with a rifle, should bury herself in the wilds of Jersey, and undergo the hardships of a woodchopper's life... The people of Dennisville... speak in glowing terms of her lady-like deportment and social accomplishments.<sup>25</sup>

While the true cause of the missed shot will never be known, there is one other possibility. A clue to the tragedy of April 5, 1878 may be found in a correspondence from an anonymous informant to the *New York Clipper* April 13, 1878. The informant stated:

Volante, the trapezist who was shot in Pawtucket by Mrs. Franklin was lately playing an engagement in New Haven, where she repeatedly expressed a presentiment that she should shortly die a violent death, having been informed by a clairvoyant whom she had consulted in New York, and the prophecy of what she avowed her intention

Both images at the left are Jennie Turnour, circa 1880.



of abandoning her trapeze performances. She appeared to be haunted with approaching death, and spoke it over and over again.<sup>26</sup>

Assuming that the informant was telling the truth, one wonders why anyone with such a morbid presentment of death would volunteer to have an apple shot from the top of her head. At any rate, if this anonymous account is true it is very possible that Volante might have flinched at the last moment with report of the rifle, and raised her head. **Bw**

### A Note on Research Sources

This paper was made possible with the assistance of the remarkable website [www.chroniclingamerica.com](http://www.chroniclingamerica.com), through the Library of Congress. Another useful resource is the on-line archives of the *New York Clipper* found through the Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections.

### Endnotes

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Above right, Leona Dare, circa 1880  
Below right, Maggie Claire, circa 1880





# Makeup

by Bill Ballantine

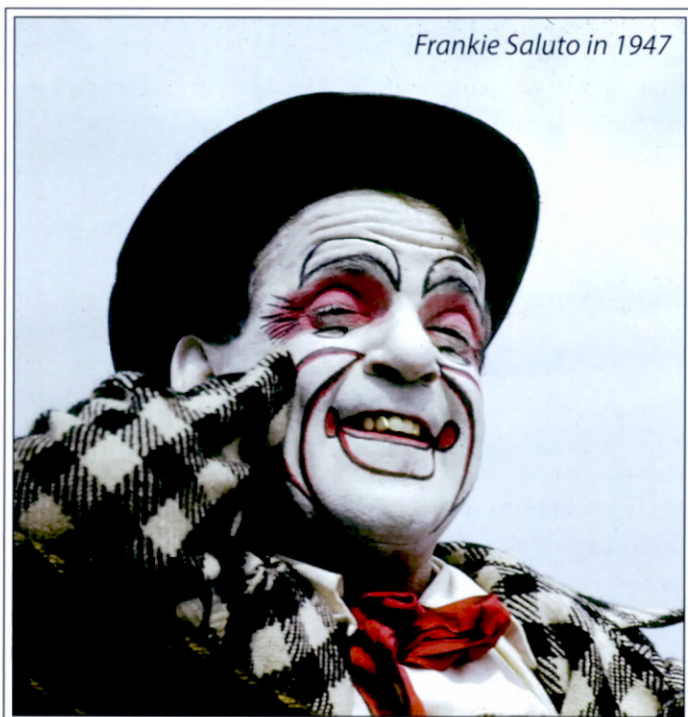
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Known for his talents in illustration as well as his important writings on circus history, Bill Ballantine (1910-1999) was perhaps best recognized as one of the earliest and most influential deans of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's Clown College. This short piece, located by son Toby Ballantine, is part of the Ballantine papers at The Ringling Museum.

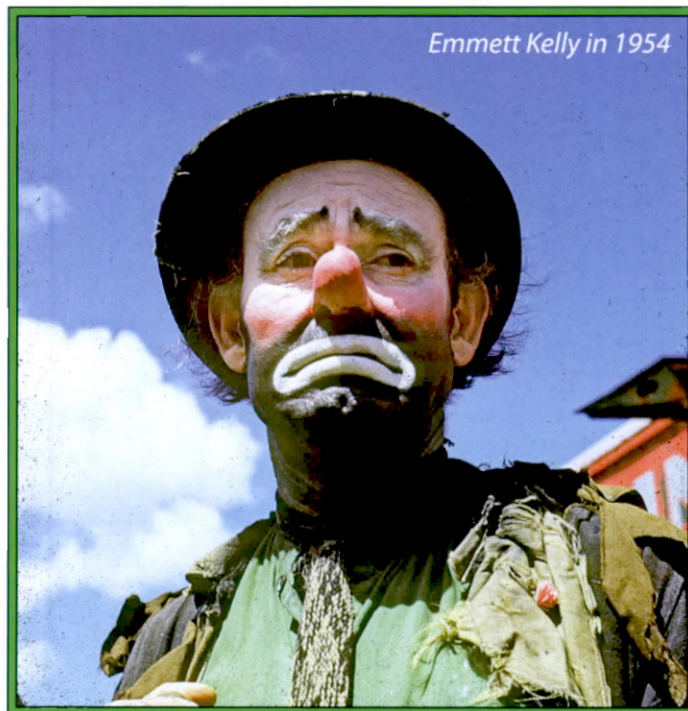
The first eight weeks of every season a clown has a cozy dressing room and a roof over his head, just like a real live actor. Then the circus leaves Boston Garden and heads outdoors. After that he can expect to find almost anything in his dressing room. It might be a small snapping turtle, a cloudburst, a length of garter snake, or railroad track. Every day he's laid wide open to the elements. His trunks are set on cinders, grass, sand, or clay. On rainy days he grabs armfuls of hay from the elephants and strews it ankle deep on the ground to keep mud to a minimum. His trunk is usually raised up on blocks, but every so often a sudden storm catches a clown unprepared. Then he has to take everything from his trunk and pour out the water that's seeped

in through the bottom. In the old days, clowns used cans of milk from the nearest grocery to raise their trunk corners, for they weren't able to carry any space-taking items.

A clown makes up before a mirror that's just about the size of his face. It's in startling contrast to the bright light-bordered mirrors found in the theater. Everything seems much darker in a clown mirror after Madison Square Garden. A big adjustment must be made for outdoor making up.



Frankie Saluto in 1947



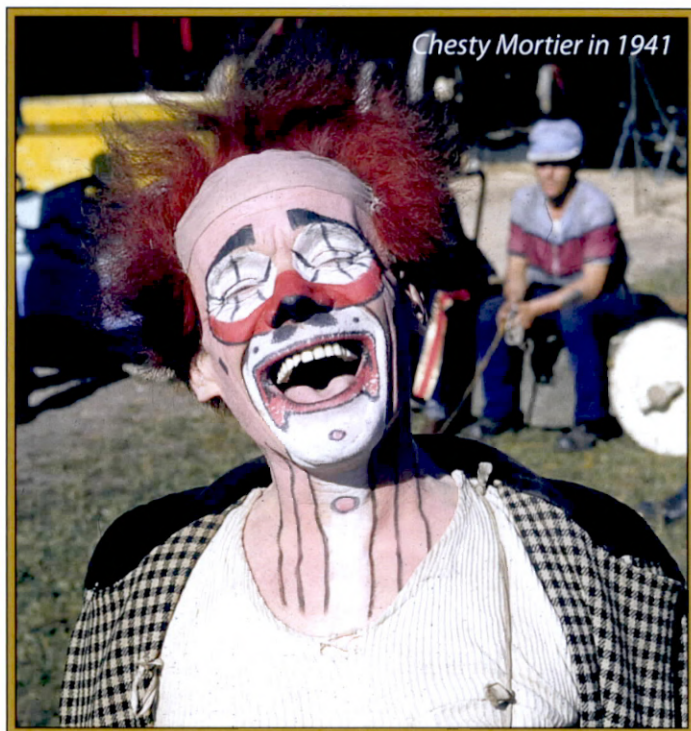
Emmett Kelly in 1954

Most clowns stand up to put on their painted faces. Emmett Kelly is one exception. He sits down because he got used to working that way during theater engagements. Midgets have no problem. Their racks are simply made lower to conform to their manikin height. Clowns get so used to putting on the same face every day that most of them could do it in the dark.

Being a sort of light-hearted Greek chorus for the rest of the show requires the clowns to appear many times during a performance. Emmett Kelly is the only clown who always wears the same costume. Most clowns change for each



different appearance, but the makeup is never changed. On days when the matinee is late, and there's not much time between shows, a clown leaves his makeup on for the night performance. Eating under makeup is no more of a problem than it is for a girl with lipstick. Ordinarily clowns are happy to clean their faces after the matinee, even though it means work again in the evening. It takes about half an hour to put on a good makeup. Under pressure it's been done in less than half that time.



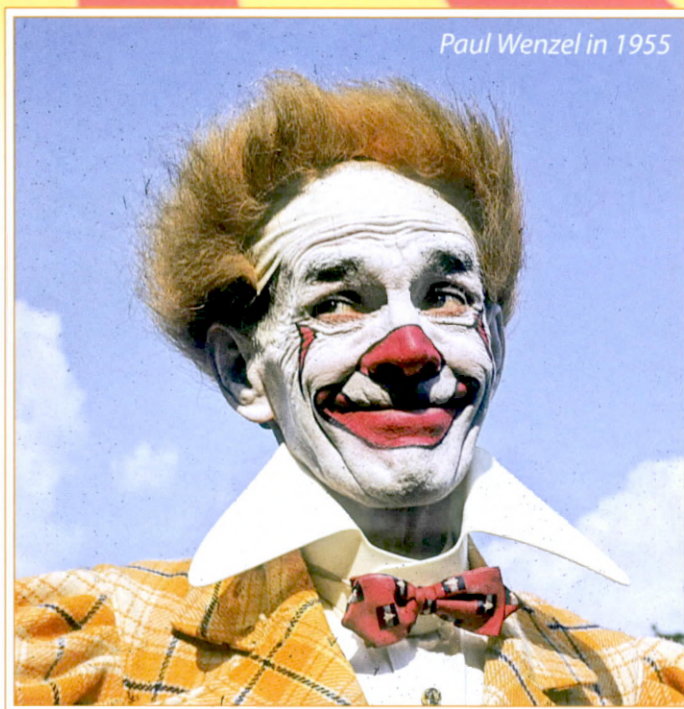
*Chesty Mortier in 1941*

### Makeup On for the Night Performance

The constant application of grease paint and other makeup is not harmful to a clown's complexion. On the contrary, it's rather good for the skin, as one of the principal ingredients of clown white is zinc oxide, used as a base for many beauty lotions and creams. Some clowns make their own white with a mixture of zinc oxide, tincture of benzoin, and olive oil. George Fox, one of the early American clowns, died of blood poisoning when he used bismuth instead of benzoin.

The white is applied directly to the face without a foundation of cold cream. Some sort of head covering, usually a brimless cap cut down from an old felt hat, is worn to keep the paint out of the hair. Sometimes just an old towel is wrapped around, turban-like. Clowns put the white on from the heels of both hands. A conscientious clown always whites the back of his neck too. The face is covered completely with white, then spots for the other colors are wiped out with a towel. Fine lines are drawn directly on the white base.

The red and blacks go on in many ways. Some clowns



*Paul Wenzel in 1955*

use their fingers to lay in the broad strokes, others use the three-quarter inch makeup sticks. Thin lines are done with a makeup pencil, which looks just like a heavy drawing pencil, or the half-inch makeup sticks.

When the paint job is complete, a light dusting of powder is applied. The powder is put on very carefully, and doesn't disturb the painted design at all. Clowns get used to spending half their lives under a coat of paint and it becomes second nature to keep their makeup from getting smeared. They protect it just as you would a sore thumb. Powdering gives the paint a matt or dull finish. Clowns who don't powder up are called "shines." Every clown makes his own powder sock. Baby undershirts are very good for this, but any white cotton stocking will do. The bottom half makes the powder sock, and the top half makes a good skull cap when it's hemmed up and has ear holes cut in it. A nurse's stocking is the best, but they were hard to get during the war. Once a powder sock is put into use it never needs laundering for the powder keeps it clean.

Clown white is fairly difficult to take off. The heavy stuff is wiped down with a towel (making the mortality rate on towels fairly high) and the balance is cleaned up with baby oil, brilliantine, or cold cream. A suggestion to make up clowns as Indians, with the usual red and white areas reversed, had a sour reception in clown alley. Red paint is much too hard to wash off. Many makeups are deliberately simple so they can be easily removed.

Clown makeup is traditionally red and black. There is seldom any variation. Clowns don't like departures from this accepted pattern. Harry Dann is the only Ringling clown who has dared to cross the line. He blends a little light green on his cheek bones. One night after a jovial night in town



he felt anything but rugged. Taking a grim view of the day ahead, and in a pixy mood, he dabbed some morning-after green under his eyes. Another clown saw it and suggested he carry the innovation farther. So Harry added the green to his regular makeup. This bit of unorthodoxy raised a critical storm for days in clown alley. But with the passage of a few years, though there are still some mutterings, the new-fanglement has been accepted.

In every age man has used the mask to impersonate Gods and other supernatural things beyond human comprehension or resemblance. Facial disguise is strongly associated with special privilege. The mask in ancient times was a checkrein on the passion of the audience. It indicated to them that all these bloody deeds were only acting, after all. Clowns whiten their faces and wear skull caps and wigs because this sort of personal sublimation isolates them from normality and gives them license to indulge in all sorts of anti-social outrages.

Connoisseurs of the circus assume a somewhat precious attitude toward clown makeup. They've dug back into clowning history and come up with rather exhaustive lists

of clown faces. According to these students of the tanbark, clown makeups come in a myriad types including motley fool, loon, pierrot, harlequin, bumpkin, sunny jim, elegant, tumbling pantaloone, grimacer, odd zany, punchinello, jim crow, cascadeur, and French comique. Many of these terms have come over from the European circus. Others derive from early days of clowning over here. Such esoteric terminology, while historically accurate, has little place in the active language of the modern circus. Most of these designations belong to the dead past. They're less than seldom used by circus performers today.

Clowns today don't refer to themselves as merry andrews or joeys. And a clown who dares call another an odd zany or a grimacer is very apt to have his putty nose punched in. Being rather plain-thinking people, clowns regard all this high-flown talk as so much rubbish. They make their main distinction in makeups between *whiteface* and *auguste* clowns. Whiteface indicates a traditional, classic clown face—all white, with red nose, red or black mouth, black eyes, eyebrows, and face lines. A whiteface clown ranges from very slight exaggeration of the features, called





*neat*, to extreme distortion, called *grotesque*. The grotesque clown usually adds an apple-sized false nose. The auguste clown's makeup follows the grotesque pattern, but is much more daring. Large rubber balls are often used as noses; huge eyes and eyebrows are painted in; red and pink faces replace white; pink, white, and black mouths are smeared from ear to ear and down to the chin. Some distinction is made between auguste and *character* clowns. The term *character* indicates a costume, rather than a makeup, difference. *Tramp* and *rustic* are usually recognized as distinct types of clown face. Both are regarded as character clowns, but not necessarily auguste.

Clown cops and professors are other examples of character clowns. The makeups in either case could be white-



Lou Jacobs

face, auguste, or grotesque. The female impersonator among clowns is referred to as being in *drag*, just as in other lines of endeavor.

Clowns with European background often distinguish types as classic, auguste, or grotesque. The classic is the traditional whiteface and always plays straight man. The auguste is the comic, a burlesque lout in caricatured civilian dress. The grotesque can be anything from a baby to a monster, plays second comic, and replaces the American term character.

A new clown fusses with his makeup quite a bit, but once he develops a good face he usually keeps it forever. Midgits are constantly changing and experimenting with their makeups. They often slyly imitate their bigger brother clowns.

Most makeup follows natural facial lines. The next time you get close to a clown, notice how his cheek and eye lines follow natural contours and wrinkles. See the advantage



Paul Jung

taken of dimples, cleft chins and other distinctive marks. Clowns do not, contrary to popular notion, all look alike. There is a code of ethics among clowns that keeps them from copying each other's makeup designs.

On the same circus no two clowns look quite the same. The unwritten law about imitating another clown's makeup is sometimes broken. It's never done on the same show, but once in a while someone on a smaller circus will steal the makeup of a Ringling clown. Clowns don't believe in that copy book stuff about imitation and the sincerest form of flattery. They get pretty hot about such face lifting. **Bw**



Felix Adler in 1946



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# Circus Historical Society

**The Circus Historical Society's mission is to preserve, promote, and share through education, the history, and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present.**

Founded in 1939, the Circus Historical Society, Inc. (CHS) is a tax-exempt, not-for-profit educational organization. Membership includes people from all walks of life including historians, scholars, circus personnel, memorabilia collectors, Americana specialists, and individuals who share both a love of the circus and a desire to preserve and disseminate its great and interesting heritage.

Benefits of membership include a subscription to CHS's journal, *Bandwagon*. The journal features a range of research and articles related to the rich history of the circus. Article types vary from intensively researched historical essays to wonderfully vivid oral histories that capture the stories of individuals from all aspects of the circus world. Members also receive newsletters filled with fascinating circus facts and news from members, circuses, museums, and other related groups around the world.

CHS members gather annually at a different location in North America to hold a convention. Papers are given, films and slides are presented, meaty tidbits of circus history are exchanged, current circus executives set forth their views and challenges, friendships are renewed and new ones made, all in the interest of circus history preservation. These sessions represent the culmination of a focused year of circus research and writings on the part of many CHS members and are cherished visits to the circus past and present.

**For information on joining the Circus Historical Society,  
visit the website at: [www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org)**



*Frederick W. Glasier, circa 1905.*

Courtesy of the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Frederick W. Glasier Collection



